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Gold Rifle, THE SHARPSHOOTER;

OR,

The Boy Detective of the Black Ranch.

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AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING HALF-DIME LIBRARIES,
Nos. 1, 20, 26, 33, 35, 39, 42, 45, 49, 53, 57, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHARMED GOBBLE—GOLD RIFLE'S SHOOTING.

THE bright hot summer on the plains had gone, followed by its next brilliant-hued neighbor, autumn, and winter had spread her mantle over the prairies and mountains of the Far West—showered her feathery-white flakes down so copiously that the wilderness was, as it were, impassable except with the aid of snow-shoes.

A terrible storm had fallen furiously over the North-west, for four days preceeding Christmas, and when the bright, yellow sun slanted her rays across the plains of white, after so long an absence, it seemed like a loving smile on Nature's deathly face, and millions of sparkling diamond-like particles were born in the glorious illumination of God's shining countenance.

The day promised to be a fair one, with clear skies, and warmth enough in the sun to obviate the bitter wintry sting which bit the nose of the early trapper, and caused all the animal kingdom of the mountains and prairies, to keep as much to shelter as possible. The streams were all frozen over, solid, and everywhere stretched that desolate waste of purest white.

Very little of life had there been on the frontier during the last week—I mean out on the wide savannas, where the snow had fallen to a depth of four and five feet on the level. Most of the wild, roving spirits who make the plains their home—trappers, hunters and outlaws—had hied themselves either to the settlements, a few of which are scattered along the course of the Northern Pacific Railway, in Dakota, or to their individual retreats, wherever they might be.

There was one little settlement where a larger share of this floating population had gathered, during the protracted storm—a station where the steam horse of the rail stopped for wood and water; and too, which was a trappers' trading station, from whence peltries were shipped by car-loads to the East.

From its insignificance, perhaps, the place had never adopted any high-toned name, but whenever mentioned, was called the Settlement, which answered all purposes. Its only life and commerce were in the skin and fur trade. Fif-

teen or twenty dwelling cabins, and a tavern block-house and smithy was all there was of the Settlement.

Away to the south but a matter of four miles loomed up the Fort, garrisoned with soldiers, under the command of General Maynard, and around it were scattered a few settlers' dwellings, prominent among which was the neat farm-house or "quarters" of General Maynard.

Thus, the territory adjacent was settled sparsely, but this did not prevent frequent raids by Tiger Track's outlaws, and the roving tribes of red-skins who hunted on the plains and in the mountains, not a dozen miles westward from the Settlement.

At the Settlement, on this crystal clear morning, all was a buzz of excitement.

The event of the great holiday was to be a turkey shoot, and not only had the trappers and citizens of the Settlement, but the military from the fort, under Acting Captain Bass, had promised to be present and take a hand.

They were as handsome, well-behaved and well-

drilled a squad of Uncle Sam's boys as held a fort in the territory, and naturally great expectations were born of their participation in the "shoot."

At early after-dinner hour, they had arrived with their band, on the spot, and all in the Settlement were congregated on the white snows of a level prairie, a few hundred yards north of the station. There were men, women and children, of almost every cast of countenance and attire: some mounted upon horses—others standing calf deep in the snow.

By noon the excessive sharpness of the weather had melted beneath the smiles of the sun, and it was quite comfortable out, except under foot.

Besides the soldiers from the fort, there were present many hunters, trappers and scouts who had won distinction on the border, and traders who had won and lost fortunes in the fur business.

The range for shooting was three hundred yards, with Remington rifles, breech-loaders, sixteen shot. A turkey was to be "stooped" at the far end of the range, and each man who had entered to shoot,

at the cost of a "quarter," had three chances to knock the bird over, if he could, and carry off the fowl as his prize.

Of course some unlucky ones must be the losers, but that was where the sport came in; and the man with the steadiest nerves and best practice stood the best show.

The "shoot" was under the management of a couple of backwoodsmen who had raised the turkeys, and had taken this method of securing a good round price for them.

About two o'clock the sport commenced, with a grand blare of music from the military band, which had volunteered its services for the occasion.

An old trapper named Strong, led off on the first fowl, but failed to disturb a feather, or even the composure of the turkey. The white covering of the prairie made it bad for good shooting, and as a consequence the fowl at the end of the range stood a good show of not being hit at all.

"By gracious!" exclaimed the man Strong, as he heard the announcement that he had not created a gobble from the turkey, "thet aire ther wust shootin' I ever did, fer a fact. I'm gennerally sum, w'en et cums ter turkey shutes, ef I do say it, an' no one'll allow as Zeke Strong ever lied jest fer bein' famuss."

"Get out, Strong! You're no good as a shot, and everybody knows it!" retorted Jay Toleman, a youth rising twenty years, the son of the chief trader of the Settlement, and an acknowledged crack shot. "You're 'way off yer groove when you tackle anything beyond a mink-trap."

"Oh! you need'n' blow, you young cuss of a bull-purp!" growled back Strong, angrily, for he did not like to be told that he was behind the average. "I've seen them as ked shute ye clear out an' out, an' not half try. Thar's thet Tiger Track, ther outlaw—I've heard sed he could brush a speck off 'm a fly's eye-winker at a distance of three hundred yards."



The gun was handed to Gold Rifle—in a moment he had sighted it, fired, and somersaulted back upon his feet.

"Oh! shut up yer lyin', you old snake, if you don't want to git knifed. I hain't in no mood fer yer chin, ter-day. I cum here to win every cussed turkey, an' I'm goin' ter do it, that's me!" Toleman said, with a contemptuous glance at the poor shooting of a trader who had overloaded his corporosity with corn-juice.

Jay Toleman was, as mentioned, the son of Jacob Toleman, the proprietor of the trading-post in the Settlement.

This elder Toleman was a rude, ruffianly customer, and it was but natural that he should bring his son up to his own standard. And Jay Toleman, as he approached his majority, had developed into a desperate character, who was equally feared and hated by the border men. He was reckless, ruffianly, and revengeful, and carried with him a conceit that made him the more disgusting to those he came in contact with.

If he worked, it was in the dead of night when no one knew it; yet he always had plenty of money, and suspicions had often been aroused that he got it unfairly, though just how no one, of course, knew. He was frequently away for several days from the Settlement, but no one knew whether he went—few cared beyond a natural curiosity.

He was of medium height, stout of limb, and largely developed in muscle, with a face that was darkly indicative of his evil nature.

There was nothing to attract in his make-up, yet he had the name of being quite a lady's man, when he mingled in the society, such as the far frontier afforded.

Some half a dozen trappers followed Strong in his attempt to knock over the turkey, but beyond the loss of a few feathers, the bird remained unharmed.

Jay Toleman at last took the stand with a satisfied smile, and raising his long rifle, shot the turkey's head off, with as much composure as though he had been firing at random.

A cheer went up from the soldiers and the crowd, as an Indian brought in the neatly decapitated bird, for it was an extraordinary shot, considering that several expert marksmen had failed.

"There! didn't I tell ye?" cried young Toleman, looking triumphantly around. "I cum ter clean out ther turkey-coops, an' that's my first shot. Hay, down there—put up another turkey!"

Another bird was speedily put up, accordingly, and several shots were fired, some of which brushed the bird, but failed to knock it over.

When it came Toleman's shot, he settled the matter with one bullet.

And so the shooting went on, the young crack-shot winning every time, much to his own elation and the disgust of the crowd. Such shooting was beyond the average—incomprehensible.

Many of the trappers refused to shoot against such odds, and withdrew from the contest, but there were others confident in their skill, to keep the *entree* full, and the shooting exciting.

But Toleman won every time, and at last the only remaining fowl was put upon the stool. He was a monstrous turkey gobbler—the largest any of the spectators had ever seen. He had a body several times larger than that of the average domesticated goose, and the owners announced his weight to be seventy-five pounds! He truly was a noble and aristocratic old fellow, with a disdainful gobble, as he took the stand, and a cheer went up for him from the crowd.*

The excitement over the handsome fowl was intense, and large sums were offered the owners, for the bird, alive, all of which were declined. The backwoodsmen declared that he was only to be had by the lucky shooter. And a hundred or more chances were sold on him, both men and women entering for the sport.

The last one on the list of entries, was the young bully of the settlement, Jay Toleman, and yet he bragged that he should be the one to tumble over the giant gobbler.

During the prevalent excitement, a horseman had approached from the west, and sitting in his saddle, was casually surveying the crowd, and the prize gobbler.

He was not one long to remain unnoticed, for soon many curious glances were leveled at him.

About twenty years had passed over his head, but these years had been busied in perfecting and developing what was now a handsome form, stout, pliable, and athletic, capable of celerity, great strength and endurance.

There was grace, too, in the body and its carriage, pleasing to the eye. In face, the young stranger was ordinarily good-looking, in the way the world looks at beauty; it was a plain, every-day face, at a glance, tanned brown by exposure, with round features; yet study might have revealed outlines in the face, in the hazel eyes, and the firm mouth, denoting many manly qualities worthy of possession—expressions of character that were noble and honest; of ambition to obtain eminence, of courage, of fearlessness, and of firm will that was unchangeable when in the right.

The stranger was clad in a serviceable hunting costume of buck-skin, liberally fringed with mink fur, a round mink cap, and knee-boots upon the feet. He was mounted upon a wiry little white mustang, of fiery spirit and wicked eye, and his saddle and its accouterments were handsome. In his belt were revolvers, a knife, and field telescope, at the back of his saddle a bow and quiver of arrows were attached; while, resting across the pommel in front of him, was a gold-plated Remington repeating rifle. It was a remarkable-looking weapon, the

barrel and all the steel parts being heavily plated with gold, and polished until they shone brightly. The sight at the muzzle of the barrel was set with a flashing diamond!

Toward this young stranger and his remarkable rifle many inquiring glances were leveled, but he appeared quite undisturbed, and watched the shooting for old King Gobbler, which was now begun, but under rather unfavorable auspices at the best.

For a gray pallor had gradually stolen over the heavens, and a fine powdery snow was sifting down, rendering the shooting uncertain, as the target was dimly discernible at a distance of three hundred yards.

Shot after shot was fired without the least reward, for the King Gobbler stood proudly upon the stool, with his great fan-tail outspread, and occasionally emitting a gobble of indignation as the bullets whizzed past.

Rapidly the contestants thinned down to a little bunch, and still the turkey remained untouched, and the excitement grew in its intensity.

What mystery was this? asked these astonished people. Was the old Gobbler possessed of a charmed life?

It was an enigma, and when even Jay Toleman finished the last of his three shots, unsuccessfully, loud expressions of wonder were heard on every side, while the young bully cursed and swore in a frightful manner.

"String's over, fellers!" cried one of the owners of the gobbler. "Three hundred an' thirty-three shots plugged at thet air turk, but nary a one tuk effect. Allow me ter remark, gentlemen, that thet fowl has bin put up at five different shoots, but never got hit yet. He bears a charmed life, an' is two years old. Any one else want ter try their luck fer a quarter, aside from them as has shot?"

"Hay! I'll shoot again!" growled young Toleman, tendering a quarter. "I was too nervous before."

"Can't help that, young feller; you're not entitled ter eruther shot, no more'n the rest. Sum feller as hain't plugged come for'a'd. Hey, you gold rifle chap, can't you hit thet gobbler?"

"Guess so," was the reply of the stranger. "Thet ain't half a shot; can stand on my head and knock that gobbler's phiz off."

A loud yell went up at the extraordinary boast. "Ouit you needn't laugh and smile in your sleeves, fer I can do it!" asserted Gold Rifle confidently.

"I'll bet you fifty dollars you can't!" shouted Jay Toleman, who had been imbibing whisky rather freely, and was getting immoderately excited. "I'm ther best shot on the border, as ye can see by my pile of turkeys here, an' I'll bet ye can't hit that old salamander yonder, ef ye try a month o' Sundays!"

"I ain't on the bet myself, but just to show ye that you've been brought up out o' your sphere of usefulness, and the wonders that can be accomplished by scientific squintin', I'll put on my spurs and show ye," Gold Rifle said, sliding from his saddle, rifle in hand. "How much is the bill of fare, boss?"

"Twenty-five cents," young feller, replied one of the managers.

"Whew! That knocks me down to par, then!" Gold Rifle said, with a wry look. "Busted, ye see; hain't seen a quarter for an age. Tell ye what I'll do, though; I'll give ye a verbal mortgage, afore the crowd heer, on my rifle. Ef I shute the gob," both rifle and gob's mine; ef I fail, the rifle's yours."

"Agreed!" eagerly accepted the managers.

"You're to stand on your head."

"If you like, and will furnish me a piece of board to keep my head from sinking into the snow."

The preparations were made amidst the greatest excitement.

Bets were made, some having courage enough by the Gold Rifle's coolness, to bet that he would win, although the majority were next to positive that his attempt would be a grand failure.

Even if he were so expert as an equilibrist, that he could balance himself on his head, how would it be possible for him to fire, a rifle with any accuracy.

The question was not long to puzzle the wonderers. Gold Rifle, as the young stranger had been quickly named, rapidly made preparations for his feat.

A large, wide piece of board was packed down upon the snow, and upon this Gold Rifle took his position.

An Indian boy stood close by, with the gold rifle, which was cocked and ready for use.

After glancing at the dimly discernible gobbler, and smiling at the applause of the crowd, he knelt upon the board and raised his body in to the air, and in a moment was perfectly balanced on his head, his feet erect in mid-air, his hands free.

The rifle was handed him—in a moment he had sighted it, fired, and somersaulted back upon his feet, while wild and loud rung the huzzas when it was seen that the bullet had dropped the King Gobbler! Later the fowl was brought in, and it was found that his head had been severed from his body! And Gold Rifle was victor.

CHAPTER II.

A VILLAINOUS ACCUSATION—JOSE HEMPERHILL.

"HELLO, Toleman; whar air ye, now?" shouted the man, Zeke Strong, who was hugely overjoyed that some one should be found to carry off the big gobbler, aside from the young bully. "Hain't ther best shot on ther border, now, aire ye?"

"I'm a little off, to-day," was the reply, in rather a crestfallen manner, "but I kin do more surprisin' feats than that."

The enthusiasm over Gold Rifle's wonderful shot, was intense.*

* Indeed, many of the far western papers wrote glowing articles on it, giving of course the hero's true name, while we only deal, for the present, with the title by which he was so widely known.

Captain Bass, of the military, came forward and locked arms with the young stranger, and led him around and introduced to him such as would be eligible acquaintances, for Captain Bass was but thirty, and a prime good fellow, who liked to see everybody social with everybody.

While they were making the rounds, three men were standing apart from the main crowd, somewhat, and engaged in watching narrowly the young sharpshooter, upon whom nearly all eyes were leveled in admiration.

But the eyes of these three men emitted only glances of suspicion and hatred; evidently the Boy Sharpshooter was not a stranger to them.

One of the trio was Jacob Toleman, the father of the young bully. He was a little, dried-up, villainous-looking man, with ill-attendance to his personal habits, and a furrowed, evil countenance that spoke but too strongly of excessive drink. He had a shrewd cast of eye, however, which would have impressed one with the opinion that he was clever at plotting or bargaining—a man of few scruples.

The second of the trio was Omerhaun, the gunsmith, who manufactured or repaired firearms in his smithy, which was situated in a dark, gloomy gorge, not far to the west of the settlement. He was a man something very nearly after the pattern of Jacob Toleman, except that he was stouter and had even a more disagreeable, hang-dog look than the trader.

Boover Legree, the third of the party, was, at a glance, a first-water border ruffian, bristling with weapons, dark, wolfish-looking, brawny—one of the heavy villains, sometimes so admirably represented on our principal theater stages.

Besides his personal appearance, which was brutal and ruffianly in the extreme, he possessed all the requisites of a ruffian—was a whisky-guzzler, a very wildcat on a fight, and of a quarrelsome nature.

Few men cared to cross him, for when enraged he was a fearful man to handle. He was considered by some to be very rich, having done, and still doing the most successful trapper business in the territory.

Each of these three men eyed the young sharpshooter with savage glances, occasionally exchanging confidences.

The kid's the very image of your man, Toleman," Legree said, with an oath, which he always used in speaking as a "finisher" or "starter." "Ken't ye see it in his durned countenance, cl'ar as brandy?"

"I dunno," replied Toleman, dubiously. "Mebbe you're right, but I can't see much resemblance."

"But the gun gives him away, I tell ye," put in Omerhaun. "I made thet plating an' put et on thet gun, five years ago, when we war in Kentucky. Don't ye suppose I've got eyes, ye fool?"

"Well, suppose that is Walter Wagner's kid—what then?"

"Sure enough—what?" sneered Legree, biting fiercely at his brigandish black mustache. "If the young feller inherits a whit of Wild Walt's dare-devil disposition, he'd be a hard customer to attack."

"Yer right, Boover. Wild Walt war wuss ner any painter; an' I kin see a dozen p'int's o' our old capt'in in ther young galoot yonder. Jest ye watch him more, will ye? He's ready ter jump out o' his hide inter a fight, under a minnit's notice."

"Yes, he has undoubtedly been trained by Wild Walt, and knows his P's an' Q's. D'ye s'pose he recognized us?"

"No! He war ter young, an' then we've all changed our titles since five years ago. But I'll bet ther boy war sent heer on our trail. Wild Walt 'll never forget ther past."

"O' course not. We must blot et fer him, tho'!" replied Toleman, grimly. "Ten thousan' in gold ain't ter be sneezed at."

"I'd like ter sneeze at et, ef 'twould put et inter my coffers!" averred Legree. "The boy's got to be tumbled over, or we're no good."

"I've a plan worth a dozen o' yourn'" Toleman, senior, said, digging with his fingers among the roots of his hair, in a speculative way.

"You notice about the feller, yonder, a slight resemblance, in form, to the outlaw, Tiger Track?"

Both Legree and the gunsmith started, and gazed at Gold Rifle, who was now standing conversing with Capt. Joe Bass.

"Thar is sum resemblance in figger," assented Legree.

"An' Tiger Track's face, ye know, is allus behind a mask. What else d'ye want ter make an outlaw out o' the boy, yonder?"

"Humph! you old rascal, what ye plumbin' after?"

"I'll illustrate," replied Toleman, with an evil smile. "Ye see, that cuss yonder may's well be put out o' the way, as we couldn't make him tell whar Wild Walt is, no more'n we ked a grindstun. Therefore, et's our line duty ter put him whar he 'll be an angel, instead up an enemy. I'll get Jay, my son, to accuse him o' being Tiger Track, and by joinin' in our testimony, we ken soon hev him higher'n Haman. See? Then we'll buy his carcass, tie et ter thet hoss o' his, an' ther hoss 'll natterally pull fer ther retreat o' ther lad, as I ken see et's a smart animal. We'll follow ther trail, an' in thet way mebbe come across Wild Walt!"

"A darned good plan!" assented Legree.

"I'd give a big pile ter git a tug at our rascally capt'in's throat, choke me, ef I wouldn't."

The plan seemed to satisfy the trio for in the course of a few minutes Jay Toleman, was motioned for and given instructions by his father.

While later, the Boy Sharpshooter, Gold Rifle, was still conversing with Captain Bass, when the two Tolemans, Omerhaun, and Boover Legree sud-

* This turkey-shoot, and this big gobbler, are all facts, according to the veracious papers of Yankton, Dakota. AUTHOR.

genly approached, and stopping in front of him, Jay Tolemancried:

"Ha! ha! Mr. Gold Rifle, yer jig's up, fer we four hev recognized you as the cuss who attacked us with a dozen outlaws down on Sleighton creek last winter. You are Tiger Track, the outlaw."

"You lie like a thief!" replied Gold Rifle, greatly surprised at the accusation. "My name is Kit Wagner, and I come from beyond the Clay Bottom Stream!"

"Bah! ye ken't lie ter us, you whelp!" here interposed Legree. "We know ye, an' yer jig's up. Fellers, grab that cuss, ef yer after wantin' Tiger Track, the outlaw and trapper's foe!"

Words like these acted like magic upon the honest but much abused trapping element.

They came forward, grim and threatening, backed by the soldiers.

But quickness here proved superior to force.

With a muttered ejaculation, Gold Rifle sprang upon his white mustang, which stood close by, and swinging his rifle right and left, regardless as to whom he hit, he dashed furiously down through the parting crowd, and over the southern snow-covered prairie, toward the distant fort.

A yell of rage escaped the Tolemans and their friends, and running to their stacked guns the soldiery possessed themselves of them, and sent a storm of lead after the daring sharpshooter.

He was by this time on a line with the turkey stool, and though none of the bullets struck him, his horse was hard hit, and dropped dead beneath him.

Pausing only long enough to take some papers from his saddle-bags, the fugitive kept on over the snow-covered prairie at a rapid speed, nearly equal to that which his horse had made, for there was a crust formed over the snow sufficient to bear up under his weight, which was indeed fortunate for the fugitive.

Without looking behind him, Gold Rifle ran on for some distance, as fast as his legs could carry him. Perhaps ten minutes elapsed, and then he paused and looked around. He was in a shallow valley or depression in the prairie, and had stopped at the edge of a dark motte of blasted pine timber.

From his position he was unable to look back upon the settlement and shooting ground, because of the intervention of the swell he had descended.

For several seconds he stood gazing around him, along the valley, and into the dismal stretch of timber, hardly knowing which way to turn.

While he was standing thus, a man with an ax on his shoulder came tramping out of the wood.

"Hello! Gracious, who're you?" was the salutation. "Look kinder as if ye war lost, or skeer'd or in a perdicament, stranger! I s'wore ef ye ain't a picter o' my aunt Sally's boy, Jim. Jim's a preacher, now, an' they do say he's sum on slingin' gospel. What's the matter, stranger?"

"Oh! nothing of much account," Gold Rifle replied. "I'm trying to dodge a pack of fools who are laboring under the delusion that I am Tiger Track, the outlaw. Was just considering which way I'd best go."

"Ye don't say so? Waal, now that's a tew bad, I s'wore to breeches. I tarnation hate ter see one feller sot enter by a big passel o' roughs, fer 'tain't right. Ef every man war only like my unkle Ike used to be, up in New Hampshire. He waz a good Christian, an' allus used ter say his prayers every night afore he retired. S'pose ye'd like ter find a hidin'-place from them chaps w'at's arter ye, eh?"

"Yes, and I must be moving," replied Gold Rifle. "Although I'm not Tiger Track, I do not want them fellows to get hold of me. Good-by."

"But, hold up, stranger. Two heads ar' better'n one, ef one on 'em's empty. Jest ye tote yer carcass along after me. Ain't often I ken do a feller a good turn, an' I allus improve such chances. Cum along, now, without a word, an' I'll show ye a coop so safe that ye'll be surprised. Ye see I'm a man o' character, an' I ain't half so green as I look, tho' I am fresh from Vermont."

And it occurred to the keen eye of Gold Rifle that he did look most ludicrously "green," for he was clear-quill, old-school Yankee, from his boots to the top of his head, a distance of some six feet and four or five inches.

He was at a glance a powerful man, but so awkward and unwieldy, as to create a belief that he could be easily handled. But this belief would have gradually died out, to an observant eye. In face the man was extremely homely and ludicrous, while about his dress and manners, was preserved all of the original and outlandish ways of his forefathers.

And as he followed trustfully in the Yankee's footsteps, Gold Rifle could but smile at the apparent clumsiness of the great fellow.

"Dunno much about you, stranger," the words came, next, "but I reckon ye ain't so bad, or ye'd show et in yer countenance. My name's Josh Hemperhill. Ye remember ther Hemperhills war a great family, up in Vermont, no doubt—great men, every mother's son of 'em—men of sound moral an' manly character, sir! Ye ken find their autobiographies anywhar in the State. Bein' ther last male o' ther family, ther hull avalanche o' manly character natterly descends onto me. None o' ther Hemperhills war afraid ter work—could chop wood an' drink hard cider from morn till night an' never squeel, I tell ye. An' as a man o' character, et behooves me ter foller in ther footsteps; so I kin out heer an' hired out ter General Maynard, fer ten dollars a year an' my board. General's a tarnation good feller, but when ye cum ter his darter, I s'wore she's jest old peaches! Ruther sweet on me, too, fer she allus tells me she admires character in a man. But, cuss darn it, ther old general went an' hired an Irishman, an' he's tryin' ter cut around Miss May w' his gib-

berish; but I'm solid in my b'liof thet she won't sacrifice good healthy character fer an Irish hod-carrier."

"Of course not," declared Gold Rifle, barely repressing a laugh at the Yankee's earnestness. "No woman of sound mind will stop to think of choosing between an ignorant Hibernian and a man of your superior qualifications."

This pleased Josh hugely and he talked an incessant flow of nonsense as he led the way rapidly through the motte and ascended to the prairie on the other side of the shallow valley. But, talking did not interfere with his rapid locomotion, as Gold Rifle soon found.

Evidently there was much in the fellow which had never been brought to light.

In a measure he was ignorant of his own strength and powers.

On rising to the level prairie again, Gold Rifle looked back toward the settlement, and saw that he was pursued, as he had surmised.

A score of the trappers had joined the now mounted soldiers, and all hands were now descending the slope into the valley.

"We shall have to run for it, Josh!" the sharpshooter said, "or those fellows will catch up with us."

"No they won't; but we'll run, as et's yet two miles to the general's."

They did run, and Gold Rifle had to exert himself to keep up with the clumsy Yankee. On over the hard crust of snow they sped like a couple of startled deer, their heads bent forward, and pointing toward a handsome farm-house which was visible in the white dazzling expanse.

Perseveringly the two men kept on, with a mile between them and the pursuers, and at last they bounded into the yard that surrounded the general's house.

And the pursuers still came on.

CHAPTER III.

DELIVER, OR DOWN GOES YOUR SHANTY.

"HERE we are, stranger, at General Maynard's, an' a gosh-darned fine feller the general is, too. Clean essence from his forefathers, an' as squar' a feller as ever chewed his cud. Bet my character ag'in' ther best bushel o' potatoes as ever grow'd, thet ther general will give you a warm welcome, but ye see I ken't jest say how't'll be with Miss May, fer she's cl'ar gone sweet over me, an' hain't got an eye-winker fer any other feller, 'less et ar' thet drafted Irishier. Now, ef I befriend ye, like a man of character should, stranger, ye're not to stick yer finger inter my pie, ner luk sweet at her, ner try ter coax her arter ye, ner any condoucements likely ter disturb my future prospects."

"You need have no fear of me, Josh," replied Gold Rifle, smiling. "I don't think I shall be likely ter interrupt ther harmony of your courtship. Lead ahead."

Josh accordingly led the way up the front steps of the elegant farm-house, and into a spacious hall, which in grandeur was beyond anything Gold Rifle had ever seen.

The walls and ceiling were beautifully decorated, and the floor carpeted richly, and furnished with mirror, hat-rack and coat-case.

Josh led on, and they entered a grand parlor, where a cheery fire was blazing brightly, and casting forth a moderate warmth.

Here in this parlor, were all evidences of wealth and taste. The apartment was richly furnished—with handsome chairs, tables and sofas, with costly carpeting upon the floor, and chandeliers pending from the ceiling. Pictures and portraits decked the walls, while strewn about here and there were many adornments. In a word, the parlor was equal to many of our grand eastern salons, even if beyond, as you may say, the scope of civilization.

And it is not infrequently in western travel, that the tourist stumbles upon these oases in the desert—homes where beauty, wealth and refinement reign.

Looking around, Gold Rifle took in his surroundings at a glance, and inwardly felt that he was in the wrong place—that he was unfitted for *entree* into such a palace.

A young lady was sitting at a piano, idly drumming the keys with her white fingers, while an old, white-haired, white-bearded man was ensconced in a great cushioned arm-chair near the fire, engaged in perusing a paper.

He was probably among the sixties in age, but a fine-looking man withal—firm, erect of carriage, and large of build—one born to command. His eye was still true and unflinching, and his hand trembled not, showing that his nerves were still under control.

He was attired in the costume of a General of the Regular Army, and near at hand a sword was hanging unsheathed, which looked as if it had seen a good many hard battles.

The young lady at the piano was the person whom the eyes of Gold Rifle centered upon, after he had given General Maynard a searching glance.

She was about eighteen years of age, surpassingly pretty; graceful, womanly in mold; her features were clear, regular and delicate, with cheeks tinted with the glow of health; a mouth sweet and tempting, and eyes of hazel hue, shaded by heavy lashes. Her hair was lighter than brown—a sunny shade, and worn in its wondrous wealth down over the shoulders in an unconfining mass.

Her attire was neat and stylish, and gazing at her in her budding womanhood, Gold Rifle felt his young heart beat faster, and a flush of enthusiastic admiration came involuntarily over his own good-natured face.

Both General Maynard and his daughter looked up in surprise as Gold Rifle and the eccentric Josh Hemperhill entered the room. But both exhibited

their courtesy when Josh had introduced his young charge.

"General an' Miss May, this 'ere's a chap they call Gold Rifle, as ye mought jedge from his gun, hyar. I found him in a fix, pursued by ther sojers o' your command, an' all ther trappers an' roughs this side o' Dakoty line, an' bein' a man of solid basis character—a trail w'ich descended from old Nebuchadnezzar Hemperhill, who died in fifteen hundred an' forty—I fetched him along w' ther insurance o' perfection. Why, sir, thet same lad, he tells me, stud on his head and shot a turkey ter-day."

General Maynard bowed, and gazed at Gold Rifle, keenly.

"Your name—what is it, young man?" he asked, his tones kindly yet stern. "What is this Josh is telling?"

"My name is Kit Wagner, sir," the Boy Sharpshooter replied, "though I am more generally called Gold Rifle, after my gun, here. As to what your man here has said, it is mainly true. I have been and am now pursued by those who participated in to-day's turkey shoot, at the settlement. Because I won the last turkey, it seems, a feeling of enmity was created against me; and a young fellow of about my own age, whom they called Tolemanc, accused me of being Tiger Track the outlaw. His assertion was confirmed by a quartette or so of his pals, and to save being lynched by the crowd I had to make a dash for liberty. Back here apiece I met your man, and he insisted upon my coming here. But I think I had not best trouble you. If I go at once, I may succeed in outwitting the pursuers, yet."

"Then you deny that you are Tiger Track, the outlaw?"

"Most assuredly I do. I never heard the name of Tiger Track until a couple of days since. My home is beyond the Clay Bottom Stream, and I am a stranger, whereabouts."

"Well, well! This is rather a remarkable case!" the general observed, watching Gold Rifle as the hawk watches its prey. "You don't look exactly like an outlaw, young man; and yet, in this deceptive life, we are all liable to make mistakes. What do you think about the matter, May?" and the white-haired veteran turned to his daughter inquiringly.

"I believe what Gold Rifle says, papa," May Maynard replied, with a slight color in her cheek, as her gaze met that of the young sharpshooter. "I am sure he does not in the least resemble Tiger Track, whom you remember chased and tried to capture us, but a month ago."

"My opinion exactly, dear. You say your name is Wagner, sir?"

"Yes, sir."

"I had a friend by that name, years ago. Now, young man, I hardly know what to say for you, for I see your pursuers are coming hotly toward the house; and they are angry, too, for many indignities have been heaped upon both soldiers and trappers by Tiger Track and his outlaws. I don't believe they'll accept any explanation from even me, and it will be necessary for you to try your luck at escaping."

"But, believing you to be what you represent, I shall not let you go without friendly assistance. May, my dear, you may take this young gentleman to the Secret Corral, and give him a choice of the horses. Josh, you may remain with me, and we will keep the rabble out of the house as long as possible."

Gold Rifle arose to follow May Maynard, but first turned to the general, a suspicion of moisture in his eyes.

"You are a good and noble man, sir," he said, shaking the extended hand warmly, "and if it ever comes within my power to do you a good turn, believe me I shall improve the chance. I thank you all for the interest you have taken in me, and maybe it won't be long ere I can repay you."

"Nothing of the kind is required, young man, although I commend your spirit. Right is right, in this world, and I have fought for it the whole of my life, and shall continue to do so as long as I have breath. Good-by, sir, and God grant you success."

Then Gold Rifle turned and was about to follow May from the parlor, but he was once more interrupted by the Yankee, Josh, who pulled him mysteriously to one side, his rude countenance a puzzle of combating expressions.

"Neow, you see heer, stranger," he began, in a hoarse whisper—"aire you a man o' sound moral an' religyus character? Be ye proof ag'in' ther smiles an' fascinashuns o' ther female sex? Ef ye ain't let me warn ye that the devil fisheth best for the soul of man when his hook is baited with a lovely woman. Neow, young stranger, ef ye're a man o' honorable character, ye won't look cross-eyed ner git spoony on my gal, Miss May, while she's esquarterin' ye ter liberty. Ye won't whisper soft sentimental nonsense inter her ear, ner feed her on sugar plums?"

"Certainly not, Josh. You should put more confidence in me than that; and then, too, Miss Maynard is almost a total stranger to me."

"Yas, that's so, sure's preechin', but, I s'wore ter breeches, ye ken't put no dependence in boys an' gals nowadays, as ye uester c'd. They lack ther solid basis character. Ther, fer instance, ar' thet Irishier, Pat Dolanigan—hedn't bin here three hours afore he war castin' sheep's eyes at Miss May. Now, stranger, mind how ye conduct yerself, fer if I ever find thet ye tried ter win ther affections of yon gal away from me, I'll skin ye alive!"

And with a tragical scowl Josh turned away, and Gold Rifle accompanied May.

The pursuing trappers and soldiers had by this time come up and drawn rein in front of the farm-house, and knowing what was required of him General Maynard stepped out upon the veranda, followed by Josh.

All the soldiers, except Captain Bass, were drawn up in line, while the rest of the party composed mainly of trappers and traders, were scattered about, presenting rather a warlike spectacle. Captain Bass, unable to restrain his men, rode forward and joined Josh and the general on the veranda.

"Order, here!" Maynard cried, a fire in his eye, and the true military ring still in his tone. "What means this disorder among you privates?"

"It means that we're after an outlaw and thief—the ruffian Tiger Track, and he's in your ranch!" replied Lieutenant Grey, a bitter outlaw-hater, who was leading the military in the place of Captain Joe Bass, who had refused to act against Gold Rifle, whom he believed to be an honest man.

"Order!" again thundered the general. "'Tis false, the charge you prefer against the young man. He is no more Tiger Track than I am, and I command you to withdraw immediately to the fort."

"But we decline!" retorted Lieutenant Grey, with a sneer. "If you'll cover a traitor, general, we won't, and we're just the boys as is going to stretch up Tiger Track to the handiest tree."

"You can not have the lad—he is not here!" said the general, seeing that it was useless to argue with so many insubordinate spirits.

"You lie!" replied Grey, fiercely. "You are a traitor to your country, yourself, and you'll deliver up the boy, or we'll tumble down your shanty."

"I have not got the young man about my premises," declared the general. "Any three of you are welcome to come in and search!"

"We won't come a step, you old cuss!" shouted the lieutenant, drawing a pistol. "Deliver, or down goes yer shanty!"

"I'll deliver nothing!" replied Maynard. "You are at liberty to come and search, for by this time your intended victim is far away."

And turning on his heel the veteran officer re-entered the house.

With an oath of rage Grey raised his weapon to fire at the retreating form, but before he could pull the fatal trigger, there was a sharp report, and a bullet from Josh Hemperhill's revolver dropped the would-be assassin dead.

A cheer of approval went up from the soldiers at the brave act, and motioning to Joe Bass to head them, they turned upon the Tolemans and the other traders, and drove them off at the point of their bayonets.

This ended what might have been a serious mob. In the meantime May Maynard had led the way out of the parlor, into a kitchen, and down a steep pair of stairs into a deep cellar.

Here she paused, and searching around for a few moments, produced a candle from a shelf, and lighted it. By its illumination Gold Rifle was enabled to see his surroundings, and all he beheld were the heavily planked walls of the cellar.

"Humph! I see no way of escape from this hole," he said.

"Because you are not in the secret," May Maynard replied, with one of her pleasant little laughs. "Here—" and she led the way to one side of the cellar. "Please push heavily against these two planks."

Gold Rifle did so, and to his surprise they fell back, leaving an aperture of considerable size. Through this he went, according to May's orders, she following and closing up the hole.

They were now in a dark underground passage, about eight feet by eight in width and height.

"This passage runs about two miles in underground," explained May, as they hurried along over a hard ground floor. "It was constructed so that in the case of an Indian siege, we could have some mode of escape, and it has an opening into a small prairie valley. Its existence is a secret except to my father and myself, and poor Josh, who thinks I am dead in love with him. Ha! ha! ha!"

They soon arrived at a point in the passage where it was vastly wider, and here several handsome horses were feeding, attended by an Indian groom.

May made hurried explanations to the young savage, and then giving Gold Rifle a warm pressure of the hand, and bidding him God speed, she hurried back toward her home above the earth, while the young man selected a fine steed from the corral, and mounting rode on through the wonderful avenue of escape, until he suddenly rounded a bend and rode out from behind a rock that hid the outlet of the passage, into the light and freedom of a little prairie valley.

CHAPTER IV.

LEGREE SHOWS HIS CLOVEN-FOOT "CHARACTER."

UNDER the charge of the soldiers the trappers and traders must perforce retreat, and they were driven quite back to the settlement, ere they were left unmolested, and the soldiers withdrew toward the fort.

By this time a larger share of the trappers had come to disbelieve the story of Gold Rifle's being Tiger Track, but there were a portion left who accepted the word of the Tolemans for it.

A consultation was held between Boover Legree, the gunsmith Omerhaun, and the two Tolemans as soon as they arrived at the settlement, in the cabin of the latter.

"It's a defeat all around," Legree growled, striving to dampen his ferocious spirit by frequent quaffs of whisky from a demijohn which sat upon the table, between them. "Ther boyce's gone, an' we ain't likely ter get a glimpse o' him ag'in in a dog's age, and that knocks all our prospects o' gettin' the fortune back from Wild Walt."

"I don't b'lieve the feller ever left old Maynard's house!" sneered Jay Toleman. "That gal o' Maynard's put him away, while ther old cuss cum outside an' harranged to us!"

"Mebbe ye're right, but ther galoot's slid out afore this time."

"Of course," assented the gunsmith, lighting his pipe. "That young cuss is smarter than you think for. He has got lots o' Wild Walt's blood in him, and I'll bet you won't easy get ahead of him."

"We must contrive to, somehow. Where does this Clay Bottom Stream lay, which he mentioned?"

"West of here," replied Jay Toleman. "I have been there several times for beaver, but didn't get enough to make it pay. It is about thirty or forty miles, I reckon, over hill an' plain."

"Ha! then it is somewhere in the neighborhood of Tiger Track's stronghold, is it not?"

"Yes—neer where the outlaw is supposed ter hold his quarters. A story has been told, frequently, of a Black Ranch on the prairies, which is surrounded by a fence of plank sixteen feet high, and assumed to be the retreat of the outlaws. But I guess no one knows the truth of the matter."

"I'm not done with Tiger Track, yet, by a long shot!" oathed Legree. "The prize he stole from my cabin on Lent creek, ten years ago, must be restored to me when I get a grip on the ruffian."

"The Tiger Track of ten years ago, and the Tiger Track of to-day cannot be the same," suggested Jacob Toleman, "for the claimant of the title to-day is represented to be scarcely more than a youth. Yet his skill in handling his men in a fight, proves that he must have been under the training of the older outlaw, who took the field shortly after our band broke up and scattered."

"It matters not. I b'lieve that Agnes Wagner is still in the power of the Tiger Track outlaw band, and if ever God sees fit ter put her in the power of Boover Legree, she'll find that she has a hard task-master in the man she scornfully refused ere she became Wild Walt's wife."

"That has been a matter of long standing, Legree, and I marvel that you still remember it!"

"I shen't forget my grudges till dirt's piled on top o' me!" replied the ruffian trader, savagely.

Two days passed by in the snow-bound northward. The weather was biting cold, and the snow still remained upon the oceanlike savannas, a winding-sheet for nature. The winter had set in, in dead earnest, to all appearances, and it was to be a severe one.

Very few hunters or trappers ventured far beyond their respective shelters, and matters on the plains were temporarily at a standstill.

Only Jay Toleman had summoned up courage to venture forth into the wilderness of snow, giving as his reason that he had a "gang" of traps out, upon the South Fork, which must be looked after.

On the second day after Christmas, the border-ruffian trader, Boover Legree, mounted his horse, and rode down over the heavy crust to General Maynard's.

He often made it a part of his business to call at the farm-house and chat with the pretty May Maynard, although his visits were ever unwelcome to the general and his daughter.

But, as he had never shown any of his villainous or disagreeable nature in their presence, and was as polite and gentlemanly as could be expected, his visits had been tolerated, for, being an influential man upon the border, the general was not desirous of crossing him.

To-day, one of the keenest, frostiest of the prevailing cold snap, the trader found May Maynard alone in the cosy parlor, the general having ridden over to the fort, on business.

May was looking her loveliest in a stylish suit of some delicate brown material, with more color than usual to her cheeks, and a brighter luster in her hazel eyes. Gazing at her—at her lovely sylph-like form, her graceful carriage, and her pretty face, half framed by her falling wealth of sunny hair, one could but be impressed with the glory of her budding womanhood.

And the evil eyes of Boover Legree were fastened gloatingly upon her while she sat at the piano, as he stood for a moment unobserved in the doorway leading into the parlor: he was contrasting her exquisite beauty and wealth of personal charms with that of the woman whom he had mentioned in the presence of the Tolemans—Agnes Wagner.

"She is a fine woman and the possessor of beauty which is rarely found. Ah! but I'd give a king's ransom to possess her, and make her furnish light to my cloudy old heart. And, what's to hinder?" and here a devilish glitter darted into the ruffian's eyes, "what's to hinder? Maybe I can win her consent, and I have the plan all ready. Once I get her in my power, Agnes Wagner can go to the devil."

The villain stood several moments, gloating over his intended victim, then stepped boldly into the room.

May wheeled around with a little scream, as she heard his heavy tread, her face grown suddenly pale.

"Oh, Mr. Legree, is it you? You frightened me by your abrupt coming."

"Eh? frightened ye, my dove?" the trader said, softly, as he took a seat near the piano. "I got lonesome up at the settlement, and so ventured down here, where it is pleasant. Besides, I have a mission of mercy to fulfill. Ha! ha! Sounds strange, does it not, to hear an old tough like me ta'kin' uv mercy? Well, ye see, I've got a heart after all, an' hain't quite so bad as I'm cracked up to be. Ye remember that feller we war after Christmas—ther one w'ile the Gold Rifle?"

"Yes! yes! What of him?" May demanded eagerly. "I was just thinking of him when you came in, wonderin' if—"

"If what?"

"Oh, no matter what! What you have to say of

him, please say quickly, for I shall have to excuse myself from entertaining any one to-day."

"Well, tain't much I've got ter say o' ther chap," Legree replied, carelessly.

"Ye see how it was. He got shot afore he k'm in hayr, an' he's layin' at ther precipice o' death now in my old trappin' cabin up on ther Clay Bottom stream. He's give up ther ghost, and sent me fer ter tell ye, as he wants ye ter come; and so forth, and so forth!"

"What! Gold Rifle dyin', and asking for me, Mr. Legree?" May exclaimed, in great agitation. "Impossible!"

"Tain't impossible, no sech a thing, my lady. I jest cum from ther, only stoppin' fer a minnit at the settlement. He has bin callin' fer you fer over half a day, sayin' as how he had an important secret ter confide ter ye."

"Where is this cabin? Could you direct me to it?"

"No, fer ye'd soon get lost in ther wilderness of snow. But, ef I o'd accept my escort, I'll soon have you at ther boyce's bedside."

May arose from her seat and paced to and fro across the soft carpet a few moments in greatest perplexity of mind. She was half-inclined to believe that Legree was lying to her—that his story was only an invention by which to entice her away from home into his villainous toils.

Her father had often warned her of him, and bade her not to trust him in the slightest, and as she thought of these warnings, she resolved to resist, and not believe his story.

"If only on Christmas day you were Gold Rifle's bitter enemy, how comes it that you are sent by him on this mission?" she asked, stopping short, and gazing sharply at the trader.

Legree flushed, and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Why—why you see—" he began; then stopped as he caught the stern glance of May's eyes.

"Enough!" she said, with a contemptuous laugh.

"Do not imperil the future of your soul by lying any further. I know your little game, now, Legree! Gold Rifle is no doubt in safe quarters, ere this, and as for your deliberate lie it has utterly failed. We have been warned that you would show your cloven foot, and it has now come forth. There, Boover Legree, is the door through which you came. You will please take your departure through it."

"No, my pretty dove, I'll do nothing of the kind at present!" the trader replied, with a frightful leer.

"Since you've found me out, partly, we may as well become better acquainted. When I leave this 'ere ranch, I'm goin' ter fetch you along with me!"

"Don't you dare to lay a hand on me, villain. I am in my father's house, and I command you to leave instantly, or I will call the servants, and have you forcibly ejected."

"Ha! ha! ha!" and Legree laughed loudly—"that's pretty well done, Miss Maynard. Your vocation should be that of an actress. Why, to my own knowledge, you do not keep servants other than that Yankee, Hemperhill, who is as green as a cabbage-leaf, and a raw Irishman who knows enough to get up hash, and that's all. Do you for one moment imagine that I have the least fear for them? If so, you are mistaken. I can lick both of them at a time."

"Then, shure, an' ye'll be doin' what ye never did afore!" exclaimed a voice, and the Irish cock, Pat Dolan, stepped into the parlor, with a grin of delight at an anticipated affray. "Allow me ter interduce meself to ye, Mister Legree—I'm Patrick Dolan, lately from the old country—sacred be his name."

Legree started to his feet with an oath, as he beheld a brawny individual, fully as heavy as himself, and a man evidently of the grit.

Dolan was a representative Irishman, with the peculiar expression of Eibhlinia writt'n all over his countenance, and the intelligent Irish sparkle in his eyes. He was not a handsome man, yet possessed a kindly bearing which would have won him friends almost anywhere.

"You see I am not unprotected, you ruffian!" May cried, triumphantly. "Dolan will fight for me!"

"Arrah! an' it's yerself as speaks the swate truth now!" assured Pat, advancing. "Shure, an' has the dirty chadhaun bin a-givin' ye any o' his slack, me lily?"

"Yes, Pat, he has been threatening to carry me off, and I have ordered him to leave the house, but he refuses to go."

"Ah! thin I'll make him go, me little shamrock. Shure, an' ef the Yankee has got the character, ter-dad Pat Dolan has got the Irish arm, an' ont goes the spalpeen av a blackguard."

And flourishing a club in his hand, the impetuous son of the Emerald Isle sprung toward Legree, who was evidently waiting for him.

But the club was of no use, for in a moment the two men were in a bear-like hug, waltzing here and there over the carpet, Pat endeavoring to work the trader out into the hall and thence out of doors.

But Legree was a man of great strength, and he bent all his energy in trying to crush his adversary.

Pat however was made like iron, and all the efforts of the trader were for a time unavailing.

"Och! ye murderin' shakel!" roared Pat, prime in his glory, "I'll show ye how they trate yer kind over at Ballyrack, on their ould soil. Shure, it's re heads I've given many a bla'guard, an' I've not lost the twist o' me wrist yit. Hooray, is ther yer style?"—as Legree made an attempt to bite—"och! I am no bog that would be after bitin'. Badacent, an' I'll kape up this jig ontill yer heart is sore as the nose av Widow Donovan's pig."

Around and around, twisting and squirming, the two men went for several moments; then Legree by a dexterous movement jerked away his left hand and dealt Pat a blow in the forehead that felled him

to the floor. Then the ruffian, with an oath, sprang toward May, who had retreated in affright.

"Now, you little tigress, I'll have you without—" "A doubt!" finished a voice, and the trader was suddenly confronted by the stalwart form of Josh Hemperhill, and a pair of cocked revolvers.

"Without a doubt, Mister Legree. Oh! ye needn't look—er's me, ef I am as green as a cabbage leaf. Now, sir, you git, or I swow ter breeches ef I don't sock et er you fer kill. I ain't a-foolin', nuther, so you git!"

With a frightful oath Legree turned and walked out into the hall, an expression of malignant hate upon his countenance.

"Remember, May Maynard, I am not through with you, yet, nor you either, you accursed Yank!" he cried, as he left the house, mounted his horse and rode away.

Josh returned to the parlor and found Dolan just crawling to his feet, with a wry expression of countenance.

"The bla'guard—the spalpeen—where is he?" was the demand.

"I put him out, Pat, darned ef I didn't! Jest as easy as chawin' cheese. Ye're a good fighter, Pat, but thar's one essential ye sadly lack, an' that's good solid basis character!"

CHAPTER V.

INTO THE WILDERNESS—JOSH'S NOVEL LOCOMOTIVE POWER.

For several days after Legree's ejection from the Maynard farm-house, things moved along in their own channel.

Little was done outside of the old general's quarters, for he was a humane man, and not the one to cause either man or beast to labor out in the bitter cold and freezing weather which prevailed.

So that during this time of little-to-do, eccentric, uncouth Josh Hemperhill had plenty to occupy his time within the farm-house, for he paid Miss May the strictest attention, and in his own way tried hard to make a successful courting. Also, he was busied in keeping a weather-eye upon his rival, the Irishman, lest he should plant a seed of fascination in the eye of Miss Maynard.

And so it happened that the two men-servants were quite a bore to poor May, whose maiden tastes and ideas took quite another channel from them, and, although she had not the heart to offend by resisting the ridiculous protestations of Josh's love, or the little gallantries of Pat Dolan, she was often thoroughly disgusted with them.

In one of these unenviable frames of mind, she applied to her father, the white-haired old general, for relief.

"Well, well, my deary," the old man said with a smile, "I don't know what you are to do, I am sure, unless you send Josh away for awhile, on some pretext or other; for I do not wish to offend the poor fellow, he having done me several good turns. The crazy loon would do almost anything for you, I believe, and you might send him off somewhere for awhile, and I'll order Dolan not to show his visage outside of the kitchen. I see by the barometer at the Fort, and a telegram from the weather bureau at Washington, that our severe cold weather is virtually over, although we may be troubled with snow."

"Very well; I'll send Josh away then," May replied, brightening up and hurrying away toward the servants' quarters. "I'm sure it would be a great relief to me to escape his ardor. And then, I have just a capital idea how to dispose of him, and kill two birds with one stone."

The day being a moderate one, with a smiling sun, she resolved to have Josh start at once, and hunted him up in the pantry, where he was innocently engaged in stowing away a half of one of Pat's New Year mince pies, with evident huge delight to think that he was "litting one," at the "blasted Irish."

Calling him one side, with a roguish glitter of fun in the expression of her hazel eyes, May approached him on her proposed plan.

"Josh, you have quite a notion of liking me, haven't you?"

"Eh? why, bless yer heart, yes, Miss May. I swow ter gracious ef ye didn't cum near takin' the breath clear away from me."

"That is because you were appropriating Dolan's pies, Josh, which is very wrong. How would you like to have me bake pies for you to eat, Josh?"

"Oh! Jerusalem! wouldn't that be O. K.?" and the Yankee's face lighted up with a beaming grin. "You don't mean it, fer sartin, do ye, Miss May?"

"Why shouldn't I, Josh? You're a great good fellow, and ought to have all the pies you could eat. You know the Fourth of July isn't a great ways off!"

"Fact, by Jimminy. Hedn't loked thet fer ahead, yet."

"And the glorious Fourth is an auspicious day for celebration of the nuptials of a happy pair, Josh?"

"Hey—how's that, Miss May?"

"I say, the 4th of July is a happy occasion for one to get spiced."

"Whew! Jewhitaker Jewsharps, yes. Ye're soddier than a brick there, Miss May."

"Yes, and I see you appreciate my candor, Josh. Not many young ladies would exchange all these little courtesies, but I believe that you'd do almost anything for me, as you seem to love me—and—"

"So I do—so I would, Miss May—sure's Methodist preachin' ar' full o' glory. Lordy! Miss May, I'm a man of character—ther solid double basis, dupix article—an' I'd wade through fire an' blood for yer sweet sake."

"Oh, no, Josh!"—with a little outburst of merriment—"I don't want you to wade through anything

but snow. Now, will you promise me to do me a favor?"

"On course I will, Miss May—anything ye're a mind to ask. I'm allus a generous chap, ef I am a leetle bit green. Thar were ther hull Hemperhill family, down ter old Nebuchadnezzar himself, who war noted for ther generosity—old Neb once giv' his right hand away ter an' old maid named Jones, an' she died an' left him a fortin' o' a milyun. Yer see ther streak o' character dated back ter ther Antediluvite itself."

"Yes, Josh; and now I tell you what I'll ask of you. You remember the young fellow you brought here—Gold Rifle?"

"Yes, I reckon. What o' him?"

"Well, I want you to go and hunt him up, and deliver to him a note which I shall give you. You may have to be absent a week, or even a month, before you find him; but after that you can have a whole winter to yourself in his company. With your weapons you can supply yourself with food, and have jolly sport."

"Yes, Miss May; but sense I've got a hankerin' arter you, I kinder hate ter go away."

"Pooh! Don't be a baby now, or I shall say you've lost your character, Josh."

"Then I'll go, Miss May, darned ef I won't! W'en ye sling a shot at my character, like ther Hemperhills of the olden time, I'm on my muscle."

So it was arranged that Josh should depart at once, and he was furnished with a fine equipment, consisting of a fur-trimmed suit of buck-skin, a Sharpe's army rifle, pistols, knife, hatchet, snow-shoes and cooking utensils, and by the time he was ready to start, he had a horse-load of traps. Best of all, he was supplied with numerous articles of food, among which were several of the coveted pies, which Dolan had spent time in preparing for New Year's, now but two days distant.

Then mounting his horse, Josh bade a sorrowful adieu to the farm-house, and its occupants, all except Pat, to whom he gave a parting scowl, and set out over the white prairie into the western wilderness.

May Maynard had some doubts about sending him adrift in mid-winter, for it seemed cruel to her, but when assured by the general that Josh was a good shot, and not the one to either starve or freeze, she felt better, and her young heart beat faster, and a little beauty-flush came upon her cheek as she thought of Kit Wagner, the Gold Rifle, and the surprise that would be his on the reception of her sealed note, which it was Josh's business to deliver.

And Josh, as he rode away further and further into the snow-bound wilderness, wore rather a grim expression of countenance.

"Neow et jest lucks to me like a kind uv a fraud!" he soliloquized, shutting one eye, obliquely. "I swow ef I don't b'lieve thet Miss May's jest bin a-humbuggin' me, ter git rid o' me. But mebbe I ain't right. Leastow et looks crooked thet she'd want me to kerry a billy-doo ter thet aire Gold Rifle chap, ef she keers a plug o' terbacery fer Josiah Hemperhill."

The snow over which the Yankee directed his course, was formed into a heavy crust, capable of safely bearing up the weight of a horse. It was easy traveling and there was chance to make good progress.

Josh, however, with a bitter doubt tugging at his honest heart-strings, was in no hurry to return to the farm-house, from which he had been banished in so neat a manner.

"I'll hunt up thet Gold Rifle an' keep my agreement with Miss May, anyhow," he muttered, "fer thet'll add ter ther strength o' my character. I'll bet a copper thet Miss May's laughin' in her sleeve, now; but, sech is life, as old unkle Nebuchadnezzar used ter say, when he corraled bugs on his pum'kin vines. An' thar's thet blasted Irish, too—hain't got no more character 'n a lame gander, an' he's grinnin', too, ter think he's got ther hull field ter himself! But, I'll bet Miss May 'll set back his impudence, fer I still b'lieve she hain't got eyes fer no one else but me."

Knowing that not enough snow had fallen since Christmas to obliterate a trail, Josh decided to repair to the little valley in which Gold Rifle had debouched from the secret passage, and here there were chances that he could strike a trail that would eventually bring him up to the sharpshooter.

After about a half-hour's ride he descended into the valley in question, and found a faint horse-trail sure enough, leading from the vicinity of the passage along the valley to the westward.

"That's Gold Rifle's trail, kerect," Josh muttered, running his eye along the valley, "but the next thing ar' ter foller it. Ef it don't play out, I'll swow ef I don't foller it, an' overtake Mr. Gold Rifle in a jiffy."

On looking at the sun he saw that it was declining toward the western horizon rapidly, but he resolved to push on and accomplish what distance he could before night came on, for the open prairie was a poor bivouac-place, and he hoped to reach some convenient motte of timber in time to camp.

Therefore he rode on through the clear sparkling winter's afternoon, never deviating from the plain trail which the hoof-strokes of Gold Rifle's horse had made upon the crust, riding at a swift gallop, as he had done.

Although Josh had been but a year in the Far West, mingling among its strange men, he had picked up a considerable smattering of prairie and woodcraft. He knew an Indian sign when he saw it, and had, on

* Dakota papers remark upon the thickness and strength of the snow-crust during the mid-winter of which we write. Upon the plains its like was never known even by the oldest hunters and trappers.

several occasions, scouted about and fetched in valuable information to the fort. Consequently he had less fear in going into the wilderness than though he had no experience.

But now, as he rode along, his mind would go back to the Maynard farm-house, and to the conclusion that he had been designedly banished from the light of May Maynard's beautiful eyes.

"Et's a durned, doggoned shame," he muttered, "an' I'll tell Miss May so, see'f I don't. She orter hev hed sun respects fer a feller's feelin's, even ef I did kum from Vermont. Reckon I'm as good as any general's darter, ef I am green and gawky. Thar war old Saltpeter Hemperhill, fer instance, who in hes boyhood war calykated to be as gawky as they make 'em. But thet ar' feller had ther true solid basis character, and darned ef he didn't rise up ter be trustee o' ther Skimmerville school—an' now they do putend ter say he's runnin' for Congress. So much fer character."

Following the course of the valley for a couple of hours, Josh then ascended to the level prairie, still directed by the snow trail. This he followed as rapidly as possible, and just at dusk sighted a motte of cottonwood timber ahead, which promised shelter for the night.

He was considerably fatigued, and without thought of danger, he rode briskly forward and entered the woodland, where but little snow had fallen upon the ground, although the branches and boughs were heavily laden with the flakes.

Dismounting in a well-protected spot, the Yankee turned his horse at liberty, and began making preparations for an evening campfire, when he was suddenly and rudely interrupted.

There was a chorus of savage yells, and he was quickly seized, thrown to the earth, and bound hand and foot. As quickly as he could collect his scattered senses, he looked around, and discovered that he was in the power of a band of red-skins, some twenty in number, who wore war-paint upon their faces, and wore of a savage, repulsive aspect.

Moreover, Josh saw by their head-dresses, and the fancy carving upon their cheeks, that they were braves of the Sioux nation.

Without offering any verbal explanation, the red-skins dragged their victim along through the woodland by the heels, taking extra pains to take all the stones and stubs in their path. At last they reached a temporary Indian encampment of seven lodges, and Josh was placed, under guard, by a roaring camp-fire.

In the course of an hour he was visited by a large portly chief, accompanied by nearly the whole camp. The chief was well known to the Yankee, for he had once participated in a hunt for the big warrior of the Sioux nation; and this chief was *Sitting Bull*.

A fugitive from the Black Hills country, there were mouths when his whereabouts were really unknown, and these months were spent in dodging among the motte-islands of the great savannas of northern Dakota.

"Wagh! Sitting Bull has seen thet white Yankee before," the chief said, a sudden wave of recognition passing over his grim countenance, so horrible in its decorative paint. "He chased thet Sioux warriors from the fort, ere the snows of winter made thet plains white. Sitting Bull does not forget."

"No, ye're darned right!" Josh retorted, with a grin, as he thought of the mentioned occasion.

"Ye're durned right, old Chair-bottomer. An' now thet ye've got me, I calkylate ye'll be after skulpin' me, or roastin' me?"

"No! Sitting Bull has even a better sport for his warriors. A wild young buffalo bull has been captured, and shall take thet Yankee toward the setting sun. Sitting Bull has said it."

A long lariat was fastened about Josh's feet, and he was again dragged through the timber—this time to where the western side of the motte met the prairie.

Here the lariat was fastened to the hind legs of an untamed bull, and Josh was ready for rapid transit. Only about ten yards of rope intervened between him and the heels of the bull, and things promised to be mutually interesting.

The whole encampment of savages had by this time gathered upon the prairie, and at a signal from Sitting Bull, there was a wild chorus of savage screeches, and the young bull gave a snarl of terror, and plunged madly away into the night, out over a boundless expanse of prairie, and dragging poor Josh ruthlessly along in the rear.

CHAPTER VI.

HUNTING THE BLACK RANCH.

ON over the wintry plain plunged the terrified young buffalo, with snorts and bellows, and at every bound of the strong young animal poor Josh was jerked along, at a terrible speed—now on his back, and then on his belly, in and out of hollows, over hummocks, and through bushes—it seemed that his infuriated war-horse would never stop.

In vain he endeavored to sit up long enough to grasp the rope with his hands, which were now free, but each time he was jerked back, and subject to the agony of his wild ride. It was fortunate that the snow-crust covered most of the rough spots over which they went, or he could not have retained his consciousness, during the first ten minutes of his journey. But, despite the snow, his clothes were torn and his skin blistered.

The motte island encampment of Sitting Bull and his warriors was left far behind, and the buffalo was heading due westward toward a long line of timber that grew upon the shores of the Little Adder.

Although it was a dark night, the groundwork of white had the effect to make objects at a considerable distance visible to the naked eye; hence, Josh discovered their approach to the timber when they were yet some distance away, and was now assailed with double fears for his personal safety.

Of course, should the bull attempt to pass through the timber, all hope of his escaping alive was lost; to be dragged along through the timber would be almost instant death.

Nearer and nearer to the timber they approached, and Josh's hair began to stand on end at the prospect ahead of him, when there was a sharp, ringing rifle report, a bellow of pain, and the bull went crashing forward to the ground.

The impetus of the fall nearly jerked the wits out of Josh, but he soon recovered to find the buffalo floundering in death-throes at his feet.

With his unloosed hands he soon had his feet at liberty, and rose to gaze around him.

He was not a hundred yards from the edge of the timber, and yet he could see nothing of the whereabouts of any person from whom the death-shot might have come. The bullet had struck the buffalo in the lower part of the neck, and penetrated to the heart.

"Waal, I'm ther luckiest cuss afoot, darn my socks ef I ain't!" Josh muttered, finding that his strong Sharpe's army rifle was still lashed to his back, and his belt weapons all intact. "Reckon all I'm lacking ar' a hoss an' grub, an' I swow ef I'm goin' back ter ther general's, ontill Miss May gits luv-sick over me, and sends fer me ter cum back ter her arms. No, sirc; that's too much o' ther old Nebuchadnezzar Hemperhill's solid basis character in me, fer that. I'll bet ther gal's a slobbin' after me now, these females are so capricious, unless—unless that gosh-darned Irishman is puttin' on his graces. Blast it, why didn't they send him out hayr, too?"

"Because two o' a kind is too much even fer good nature to tolerate!" spoke a pleasant voice, and a handsome form loomed up through the darkness. "Hello! I'll be jugged ef et ain't the Yankee, Josh!"

And no less a personage than Gold Rifle advanced to the side of the dead bull!

"Yes, an' yer thet Gold Rifle chap I'm huntin' fer!" cried Josh, with a broad grin of delight. "How d'ye do, anyhow? I'm as tickled ter see ye as I would be ter see my hoss, w'ich I left back heer in ther hands of old Chair-bottomer—Sittin' Bull."

"Ah! then it is to the red-skins you owe this ride, eh?" and a smile illuminated Gold Rifle's face. "I thought so, when I heard you coming. I knew Sittin' Bull was somewhere around on the plains, but was ignorant of his exact whereabouts. But, whatever brought you out here so far from the fort?"

"Jest in search fer you!" Josh grunted, with a scowl, as he thought of May Maynard and the Irishman. "Ye see, Miss May sent me fer ter fetch ye a letter, an' she's goin' ter marry me next Fourth o' July."

"What, Miss Maynard marry you, Josh?"

"On course she is! I swow ef I ain't ther luckiest 'coon in this kentry. Promised me this very mornin', afore we parted."

"Get out! You shouldn't take what she says to heart, Josh! She's only foolin' ye, I guess." "Darnation, no! She's legitimately engaged ter me, an' we're goin' ter hev frostin' an' firecrackers on ther weddin'-cake. An' ef she tries ter go back on me, I'll sue her fer briches o' promise, I swow ef I won't."

"Well, I wish you much joy already, Josh!" Gold Rifle said, with a smile. "But you say Miss Maynard sent a message. Come along to my camp in yonder wood, and let me have it."

Accordingly the young sharpshooter led the way over the prairie toward the gloomy line of timber, and Josh limped after him as fast as he could, for he was decidedly stiff from his rapid ride over the prairie. Never in all his boyhood's coasting experience, had he ridden so fast over the snow with nothing between him and the snow but his clothing. It was something novel in its way, yet quite uninteresting to the person concerned.

They soon arrived at Gold Rifle's camp, which was pitched in under the shelter of the timber, and contiguous to the bank of a medium-sized stream, known as the Little Alder. A fire was burning brightly within a lodge of buffalo-skins, and it was a welcome sight to half-frozen Josh.

"Here we are!" Gold Rifle cried, as they entered the cheery lodge, where was warmth and the odor of cooking meat. "Now give me the letter from Miss Maynard, and you can warm and repair damages."

"Seems ter me ye're in an awful hurry ter git a letter from one ye ain't got no claim to," grumbled Josh, taking off one of his serviceable cow-hide boots, and producing a crumpled envelope. "Thar it is, but I give ye ter understand thet ther gal ain't yours, no more'n the name o' Hemperhill is."

"No, of course not," Gold Rifle replied, receiving the note, and tearing it carefully open, thinking the while of the sweet and pretty daughter of the general, who had helped him to escape, and whom he was with, in thought, constantly.

The note was penned in a delicate, graceful hand, and ran as follows, with the heading of date, place, etc.

"MR. WAGNER:

"DEAR SIR—I send you this note by our man-servant, Josh Hemperhill, with the request that he will deliver it safely to you. In it I wish to make myself so bold as to extend you an invitation to a social gathering which will take place at our quarters on the 16th of January, that being the eighteenth anniversary of my birth. Your presence would be

a source of much pleasure to father and myself. Josh you can keep with you until you pay us the desired visit. Very truly yours,

"MAY MAYNARD."

A flush of joy stole over Gold Rifle's face as he perused the above—joy because of the honor conferred upon him by the Maynards, and because he was given the opportunity to call upon and form a more thorough acquaintance with pretty May than had thus far been his privilege.

"I'll go!" was his instant resolve, "and have a good time. If between now and then I can not clear myself of being Tiger Track, it is curious. I have the whole thing pretty well seasoned for cooking already."

"Waal!" growled Josh, as the young sharpshooter slipped the note into his pocket—"what did my gal write ter ye, Cap? 'S'pect she guv ye an invite ter our weddin', eh?"

"She give an invitation to a birthday gathering, Josh, the sixteenth of next month. To-morrow is the first—New Year's. And I mean to make the moments count too."

"Ye don't say—an' did she put in any kisses or luv poetry fer me?"

"Nary, Josh! She said you was to remain with me, until I get ready to go back to the general's. So now, you've got to follow the trail I lead, for the next two weeks."

"All right, I'm ther chap as kin do it, ef I do say so. I swow ther breeches ef I don't believe I could outwalk ye!"

"I haven't the least doubt of it, Josh. But we won't try. Now, then, it is necessary that you should know my business, as we are to be together. Look at this, and you will understand my calling here upon the prairies;" and pulling aside a strip of the fur with which his buck-skin suit was ornamented, the firelight glanced upon a plate badge of solid gold, with a star in the center, and an inscription on the plate, in beautiful design, which read:

U. S. GOVERNMENT,

TO
C. A. WAGNER,

In recognition of faithful services
as a detective spy.

Upon the other edge was an inscriptive date—"March, 187—"

"Waal, by gosh, ef ye ain't one o' them detective chaps!" Josh exclaimed, in astonishment. "Who'd ever a-thought it? Thar war my old uncle Nebuchadnezzar, who war once in thet line—uster set for a hull hour on a stretch, a-tryin' ter detect w'ether mice got into ther granary, or not."

"Yes, I am a detective," Gold Rifle confessed, "and my business here is to break up Tiger Track's outlaw band, and clean out a certain nest of devilry known as the Black Ranch—the stronghold of this same Tiger Track, by the way."

"Phew! ye don't say so! Neow, why didn't ye show yer culleers ter them galoots as war after ye, ther other day?"

"That was because I did not care to have my business publicly known. When I do, I shall apply to General Maynard for co-operation in exterminating the gang. I believe there were men among those that chased me, who are members of Tiger Track's band."

"Ye don't say so! Waal! waal! an' what are ye goin' ter do, now, since you've added in a man like me, o' solid duplex basis character?"

"I am hunting for this Black Ranch. Very few upon the Dakota frontier know where it is, yet many strange stories are told of it, and the mysteries about it. It is said to be somewhere upon these prairies, but that a man might look for it a lifetime and not stumble upon it. Yet, I believe that I am upon the trail of it, and hope to find it, ere long. You can accompany me, and may be of some aid."

The evening meal of roasted deer-meat was now served up, and both Josh and the young detective did it ample justice. The fire was then replenished with fuel, and they turned in for the night.

Early on the following morning they were astir, and after eating what was left from the evening meal, Gold Rifle furnished two mustangs from a bough-shed, in the timber, and both he and Josh mounted and set off, Gold Rifle in the lead.

He headed their course, after leaving the timber, due north, and rode rapidly, the crust holding up beneath the strokes of the animals' feet. Josh followed close behind, for, although he was large, awkward and clumsy, he was by no means a poor horseman, as Gold Rifle saw at once.

About the middle of the forenoon they came upon a single trail, headed in a north-westerly direction. It was evidently several days old, and had partly filled up.

"Where do you 'spect thet aire trail leads ter?" asked Josh, as he drew rein alongside Gold Rifle.

"White or Injun?"

"White!" was the reply; "don't you see the horse was shod?"

"Who's been along heer?"

"That I don't know. If I knew who is absent from the settlement, I might better determine. Now, you see, the course we are following, I have no doubt is the true one to the Black Ranch, and yet this other trail probably leads there, too. Now, you must follow one, and I'll take the other."

It was accordingly arranged that Josh should follow the north-western trail, while Gold Rifle kept straight ahead. He rode rapidly, and in three hours came up with Josh, where the two trails merged into one. The north-western route was only a roundabout way, to throw off scent.

"We have the straight trail fore us now, eh?" Josh demanded

"Yes, I should say so. If nothing happens, we may sight it before dark."

They rode rapidly forward.

The formation of the prairie was now perfectly level for miles to come, and the snow-crust stout, so that they were enabled to make fair progress.

The afternoon wore away toward darkness; the sun sunk to a level with the ocean of white, and away to the north, on the crest of a prairie billow a dark speck grew visible to the searching gaze of the two horsemen. At first it was no larger than a pea; then it grew steadily until it had assumed and was gradually assuming larger proportions, the further they advanced toward it. In half an hour they were near enough to define a great barn-like edifice upon the towering crest of a distant prairie billow, surrounded by a high fence of plank.

And Gold Rifle gave vent to a shout of joy, and drew rein as he beheld all this, motioning Josh to stop, also.

"That's the Black Ranch and stronghold of Tiger Track, undoubtedly," he said, "and that is all we want to know at present. The next thing is to find a hiding-place, for I'm satisfied we'll have a chance to fight outlaws, soon!"

CHAPTER VII.

A BOY IN CAMP—A STORY OF MAMMA AND THE BLACK RANCH.

Upon the day following Gold Rifle's discovery of the Black Ranch upon the prairie, an Indian pony made its way to the settlement, and came to a halt on the village square. It was not riderless, for a boy of some six or seven years, well wrapped up in furs, was seated astride of the saddle.

One by one the villagers were attracted to the spot, and gathered around the lad with the greatest curiosity. At a glance the waif did not belong either at the fort or settlement, yet here he was, alone and unaccompanied; and from whence did he come?

He was fat and chubby of his age, with a stolid boyish face, a firm-set mouth, peculiar to see in one so young, and eyes as black as coal, and having the sparkle of the diamond.

He did not appear to be frightened, as gradually a crowd gathered around him, but, rather, seemed to watch the men with interest, slung out, with the wonderful intuition of childhood, the faces that were good and those which were evil.

At first the villagers were at a loss what to do, but finally an old trapper broke the ice by approaching the little stranger, and beginning a series of questions.

"Well, my little man, who are you?" was the first interrogative.

"I'm Jack!" was the reply, without any show of bashfulness; and, too, it was apparent, that the little fellow was intelligent beyond his age.

"Jack, eh? Well, what else—Jack what?"

"Dunno!" was the reply.

"Don't know where you live, do you?"

"Yes, I do—at the Black Ranch. Mamma is there—be'n very sick but gettin' better. Mamma's a very nice woman."

"As you are evidently a nice little fellow, who is your mamma?"

"Mamma's my mamma, sir."

"Of course, you little man, but what is your mamma's name?"

"Dunno; fordot mamma's name."

"That's too bad. You say your mamma's at the Black Ranch? What kind of a place is that?"

"Great awful big house, with high fence around!" exclaimed Master Jack, raising his hands high aloft to signify how big he meant, but could not explain.

"Ah! awful big house with high fence around? Boys, that corresponds with what we have previously heard of the place. Well, my little man, what do they do in this big house, and how many men is there?"

The boy hesitated, and looked thoughtfully around.

"Dunno what they do—lots of men; more'n they is here," he replied, at length. "Men got guns."

"What does your mamma do, boy?"

"Mamma she lays to bed most all day an' cries, an' at night they lock here up in the room."

"Ha! what is this, you little cuss?" cried a gruff voice, and Jacob Toleman pushed forward, excitedly.

"Hell and furies! How'd you ever get this far away from home?" and the ruffian trader laid a heavy hand upon the waif's arm, and he began to cry in affright.

"Hold! stop, there, Jacob Toleman!" cried an authoritative voice, and General Maynard rode forward. "Get away, you villain, or I'll have you arrested and put in irons. What right have you to lay hands on that boy?"

"The right of a protector and guardian—the right of a grandfather!" retorted the trader, defiantly. "The little devil has wandered away from home, and I'll see that he goes back in a hurry."

"Then you have to do with the outlaw's Black Ranch, eh?" demanded the general, sternly.

"No! the brat never saw the Black Ranch nor any one else. It is all a cussed lie about there being such a place."

"Oh! I dare say you know all about it. But we will not trust to your testimony in this case. The child is too young to know the meaning of a lie, and we will believe him in preference to you, whom we all know so well. Step aside, sir, and let me question the lad!"

At first Toleman hesitated, and was inclined to disobey, but the drawing of the general's sword had the effect to make him retire. The general then rode closer to the winter-waif.

"Your name is Jack, eh, little fellow?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your mamma's name—"
 "Dunno; fordot."
 "She is a prisoner in the Black Ranch?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Do you know this man?" pointing out the elder Toleman.

"Yes. He bad man! He comes and say very bad, wicked words to mamma, dat make her cry."
 "Ha! and is there any one else here among this crowd, whom you have seen at the Black Ranch?"
 "No!" replied the boy, after a glance around.
 "Tiger Track he's very bad to mamma, so she git Injun to send me off here. I fought o' mamma's name, now. It is Mamma Mabel!"

General Maynard started violently in his saddle, and gazed eagerly at the boy.

"What! what! Mabel—Mabel what, boy?" and the veteran was terribly excited. "Speak! what is the remainder of your mother's name?"

"I don't know!" the boy replied, growing frightened. "Name jest Mamma Mabel!"

"Mabel! Mabel! my God, can it be possible!" General Maynard muttered, running his hand across his eyes. "Gentlemen!"—turning to the curious crowd, "I believe that I am on the eve of a discovery that will enlighten me concerning a lost one who has been dead to me for the last ten years. I therefore claim the right to this boy, until I learn more definitely what I wish to know. Are you willing I shall take him with me?"

"Ay! ay!" was the rousing shout in concert, for the general was highly respected by the large share of the settlers. "The boy is yours."

"And, my men, I may call upon you to assist in attacking this unknown nest of the outlaws, the Black Ranch. Can I rely upon your aid?"
 "Ay! ay! general!" was the eager response.
 "We're with you, heart and soul."

Then General Maynard rode away toward his farm-house, leading the horse which bore Master Jack, by his side.

When they arrived at the farm-house, little Jack was taken to the parlor, where May gave him a loving welcome, and before an hour had passed he was quite at home, although he occasionally mentioned "mamma," which showed that she, whoever she was, had a deep hold upon his childish affection.

Nothing was said on the subject to the boy, but May and the General had a long talk about her and the Black Ranch.

"It is undoubtedly my Mabel," the old man said, bowing his head in his hands, "who has been lost to me these twenty years. Poor Mabel! to think that she is languishing in a barbarous prison, when she might be here, a comfort to my declining years."

"And who is this Mabel?" May Maynard asked, with interest. "You never told me of her heretofore."

"Because I did not wish to bring up the past. May, you little know all the disgrace I have suffered in my younger years, and I may as well give you a brief of the story, to-day. Mabel was my first and only daughter. Don't start, my dear, for I will explain about you, by and by. Mabel, as I said, was my first daughter and also my only child by marriage. Her mother died upon giving birth to her, and Mabel was placed under the charge of a competent nurse."

During the succeeding seventeen years, I must confess that I was little with my child; war together with a multitude of other matters, kept me away for a most part of the time. Yet I had a handsome home on the Hudson, which I had inherited, and was able to rear my child in luxury and give her all the advantages of education. At the age of seventeen she was the belle of her social circle, and I began to entertain hopes of her making an eligible match."

"About this time I saw a chance for gigantic speculations in Western railroads, and disposing of all my eastern property, moved away to this country. And it was the curse of my life, for in three short months I had no daughter, she having secretly wedded a man of questionable character, and had fled. I heard afterward that he became the chief of a band of robbers. For the recovery of my child I searched and toiled until the outbreak of the great war between the North and the South; then having nothing to deter me, I rejoined the army and fought until victory was ours, and I had attained the honors of generalship, which, thank God, I never disgraced. Just a year or two before the war I took you—adopted you as my own child, from the death-bed of a gallant old officer of the regular army, and have reared you under my name, as you were such an exact image of what my Mabel once was. Your real name is May Faulkland, but you are welcome to mine own, until you make a choice of a husband, and may God grant that your choice be crowned with success."

"Yes, dear papa; but do you believe it possible that the Mabel of whom this little boy speaks, can be your long-lost daughter?"

"Yes, May, I do candidly believe that the prisoner of the Black Ranch, and my long-lost Mabel are the same. Indeed, the child, yonder, bears a striking resemblance to Mabel, as she looked when last I saw her."

"And, do you know, papa, there is another, whose features resemble those in yonder portrait—which is of your lost daughter, is it not?"

"Yes, that is a correct portrait of Mabel; and to what other do you refer?"

"To the young man who was flying to escape the mob, on Christmas—Gold Rifle."

"Ha! is that so? I did not notice, I am sure!"

"Yes, I was struck at once with the resemblance between the two, but I did not speak of it, as one often meets persons resembling each other who entertain not the slightest degree of relationship."

"Well, if this is so, I should like to see the young man again, for he may indeed be the child of my daughter by her outlaw husband, for it seems to me that the name of Wagner is not foreign to my memory. Whether or not I have heard it in connection with the name of my daughter's husband, I do not know. After leaving home she was called Agnes. He changed his name, doubtless, after he became an outlaw."

"Well, what do you propose to do in this case, believing that Mabel is indeed alive and in the mysterious Black Ranch?"

"Do? why I shall organize a company out of the trappers and hangers-on at the settlement, and start to the rescue at once. And, while I think of it, 'twould be a good plan to start at once, while Master Jack's horse's trail remains distinct. No doubt by it, and the little fellow's direction—for he is observant and as keen as a razor—we can find the den of outlaws without much trouble. And then we must take it!"

"Oh! 'twould be glorious fun, papa!" May cried, with a zest. "I should love to be along. Can I go, please—can I? I can dress up in my male hunting costume, and you know that I'm a capital shot. May, I go?"

"Yes, child, even though it may be to instant death, for I fear to leave you here alone and unprotected, with two such heartless wretches hovering at the settlement, as Jacob Toleman and Boover Legree. Yes, get yourself and outfit in readiness, at once, for I shall start as soon as I can ride back to the settlement and equip my men."

"Why not take the soldiers, papa?"

"Because they would be of little or no service in this kind of work. I want men who will know what I mean when I say *fight!* Such are found among our hunters and scouts. As I said before, get yourself ready; arm yourself thoroughly, and provision and clothe yourself for a long siege, for it may be months ere we get back from our journey."

Then the general arose and left the parlor, to order his horse, and May also hastened to her room to prepare for her expedition into the wilderness, which she was confident would be a source of great delight to her.

For she was a lover of the ride and hunt and wild life incident to camping out; had on more than one occasion scoured the plains in search of game, and proven herself an unerring shot.

And it was a pleasurable thought to her, that, by going now, she might be able to do good to a suffering sister; then, too, 'way down in her young heart there was the least bit of a hope that, in the path of their journey, they might run across the young sharpshooter, Gold Rifle.

For the young hunter and scout was constantly on her mind, and haunted her dreams, until she had grown to listen expectantly for his footsteps, and dream sweet dreams of him, in whose face there was so much that was noble.

First of all she provided herself with and donned a semi-male hunting suit of buck-skin, which had done her service in many a prairie tournament, before, and fitted her to perfection. Then she armed herself with a Sharpe's mid-range rifle, and revolvers and knife.

Her horse, a handsome bay animal was then brought around by Pat Dolan, and the saddle-bags equipped with a good stock of cold meats and other provision for the coming campaign.

By the time all this was accomplished, the general arrived at the farm-house with twenty men whom he had enlisted in his service at the settlement.

They were mostly trappers and fur-traders, a rough, but kindly-disposed band. The general had been careful in selecting his men, for he well knew that a great deal depended upon their skill and trustfulness.

A well-stocked larder ever being a fact in the Maynard mansion, the band were all provisioned there before starting, for little of the game kind was to be found for the searching in the snow-bound wilderness.

At last everything was in readiness, and with the white-haired old general in the lead, and May by his side, leading the horse of little Master Jack, the cavalcade set off over the snow-crust toward the Black Ranch—for General Maynard had secured the services of an old trapper who had seen the famous outlaws' den, and was confident he could guide the party to it without any trouble.

CHAPTER VIII.

GOLD RIFLE'S DARING VENTURE—A TRAP THAT CAUGHT—FROM LIGHT TO DARKNESS.

FROM the Black Ranch, it would have been comparatively an easy matter to have detected the two horsemen as they stopped in full view upon a crest of white. Gold Rifle was well aware of this, and having but little doubt that their rash advance had already been discovered, he knew it would be necessary to build a place of refuge; hence his words at the conclusion of a late chapter.

Glancing sharply around he sought and found a place which he knew would better answer their purpose, in case of an attack, than the open prairie. It was a small mottle of a few scattering cottonwoods, which grew around a buffalo wallow; yet it commanded a view on all sides, and was the best cover to be had in the vicinity.

"If it were not that we are obliged to leave a snow-trail," the young detective said, as he and Josh made haste to take possession of the mottle—"if it were not for this, we might evade the cusses yet."

"How d'ye kno' they've seen us yet?" was the Yankee's demand, for he was one who believed in looking on the best side until it came to the worst.

"I don't know for positive, but it looks very likely. You notice that there is a high tower rising from one

corner of the Black Ranch? I have no doubt but that is a watch tower."

"Waal, mebbe yer right. But, what's ther use o' outlaws coming out heer? I swow ter breeches ef they ain't foolish ter think o' fightin' men o' solid basis character like me an' you!"

"Correct; but that makes no difference with them. They fight all men alike and I reckon they're pretty rough customers to handle. Nor do I believe that they confine their depredations and doings alone to outlawry in this country. To me, it stands to reason that they could not exist upon the few pelts they capture and dispose of—they wouldn't fetch more than enough to supply the gang with bad whisky. And, then, the surrounding expanse of territory for miles and miles offers no great inducement for raiding and plunder. No, sir; there is a deeper something behind all this outlaw business, and I'm the one that is going to unravel the ball o' bu'st, you hear me! Already I've got my mind glued onto the business, and I'm going through with it."

Turning their horses' heads while they were conversing, they rode away to the mottle, and dismounted. Here the ground was less covered with snow, and with easily extemporized shovels of bark they soon had a large space cleared to earth on which to build a fire and camp. This operation piled the snow up around them so as to quite hide their camp, and kept off the sharp cutting wind.

Gold Rifle had in his saddle-bags a piece of raw venison, yet, large enough to last for a couple of meals, and they concluded to use this first, and reserve their other provender for the future.

Leaving Josh to prepare the evening meal, Gold Rifle left their snow fortifications, and scouted about the camp.

He could find no signs of enemies in the neighborhood, nor were there any signs of approaching outlaws from the Ranch. This was a relief to the young sharpshooter, for he had no desire to fight against odds of twenty to one.

In the direction of the Black Ranch all was quiet; evidently the outlaws had not discovered their approach.

Scouting through to the western side of the mottle, the young detective made another important discovery, namely—the existence of a deep, sluggish stream of water.

It was now frozen over, with a glassy-like surface, caused by an overflow and freeze. That it was deep and still water, Gold Rifle determined by the banks which were full to a level with the grounding. This stream ran through a deep and extremely narrow valley which opened abruptly down from the western side of the mottle—a sort of channel through Nature's cold white face, and by following its course as far as eyesight would allow, Gold Rifle came to the conclusion that the stream ran in its northerly branch not far from the site of the Black Ranch, for along both edges of the valley grew fringes of a species of sage-bush, and these he could see a long way in the direction of the ranch.

Returning to camp he found Josh ready to serve up their meal, and while they partook of the venison, he related his discovery of the stream.

"I believe it's the only way I can approach any nearer to the outlaws' nest than I am now," he said, thoughtfully, "for to go over the prairie is certain discovery. Luckily, I am provided with a pair of good skates, and if the stream goes by within gunshot of the ranch, I'm bound to get that near, anyhow."

"Yas; but whar'm I goin' ter sport while ye're doin' this?" questioned Josh, with a grim look. "D'ye alkylate I'm goin' ter foller at yer heels, an' run the risk o' gettin' my head blowed off? Ef I am a man o' character, I hain't hankerin' after losin' my top-knot."

"Oh! no danger about you! It will be your duty to stay here and take care of the horses and the camp. You can keep an occasional look-out to prevent being surprised and captured, and await my return, which will be immediately after I spy out all that is requisite to my plans. If the cusses get me in a trap, why probably you won't see me at all, and had better go back to the fort and give the alarm."

Darkness was by this time enshrouding the earth, and Gold Rifle determined to cover the distance between him and the Black Ranch while it lasted.

For, he argued, the place would be less on guard should he arrive at the dead of night, and he would have a favorable opportunity to get inside the walls.

Looking carefully to the condition of his rifle and revolvers, he bade Josh adieu, and leaving the camp, descended the narrow valley to the ice. Here he paused long enough to affix to his boots a handsome pair of regulation skates, and then he darted rapidly away over the glassy surface of the river like a bird.

The course of the river was very tortuous and deceptive, and it soon became apparent to the young detective that to reach the Ranch he must accomplish about twice the distance that would have been necessary, had he gone overland.

But he cared not for this, as the skating was excellent, and he enjoyed it hugely. Every stroke sent him nearer and nearer to his destination.

In two hours' time he concluded he must be in close proximity to the Ranch, and accordingly slackened his speed, finally coming to a halt.

With his skates still fastened to his feet, he left the ice, and cautiously ascended so that his face was on a level with the prairie. He gazed around. It was a dark, moonless night, yet he was able to distinguish objects at a considerable distance, the snow lighting up the ground, dimly.

The Black Ranch now lay to the north-east of him, several miles, but by the line of bushes which fringed the valley, he saw what he had before surmised—that the stream and valley wound close to the Ranch

on the northern side, but just how close he was yet unable to determine.

Going back to the river, he resumed his journey on the ice, making strangely weird music with his ringing skates.

The remaining distance he accomplished in another half hour, without much exertion, and found himself in an abrupt bend in the course of the stream, just around which was the Black Ranch, in close proximity to the banks. The high plank fence, in fact, ran out to the very edge of the bank, and only the upper part of the Ranch could be seen over its top.

After he had brought himself as near as he dared, without exposing himself, he sat down and took off his skates, and secreted them in the butt of a hollow log which ended up through the ice. Wrapping his precious rifle in oil-cloth, he also secreted it in among the bushes, reserving for use only his revolver and knife, for in close quarters he knew these would answer his purpose better than a rifle.

His next move was to creep stealthily up among the fringe of hen-sage, and lying low, make observations.

All about the place was deepest quiet.

There were no lights, no signs of life—nothing in sight to tell that the grim structure within the black painted-fence was inhabited by humans.

Nor was there a sound of nature afoot on the night, unless, maybe, it was the snap peculiar to all bodies of ice on a sharp night.

There was no light in the tower which arose a score of feet above the main building at the southwestern corner, and after watching for some time without seeing any one, Gold Rifle came to the conclusion that there was no sentinel posted to-night.

Satisfied on this, he crept from his concealment rapidly over the snow toward the fence. This was fully fifteen feet high, and he knew that if he could once get in its shadow, it would be one strong point gained in his favor.

And his rapidity of movement soon brought him safely there, and he stood up alongside the fence and listened.

The same dead, ghostly silence still prevailed upon the prairie and around the Ranch, and the young detective could but draw the conclusion that the place was wrapt in slumber.

Still, with this knowledge, very few men of older years than Gold Rifle, would have dared to venture so boldly under the very shadow of such a death den as was the Black Ranch, by repute.

After listening to assure himself that no one had been disturbed by his coming, Gold Rifle sat down and took off his boots, and hid them in the snow where to find them again, for at present time of action their crunching onto the crust was dangerous. As a substitute to protect his feet from the cold, he drew upon his feet heavy fur moccasins, which were among the mysterious contents of his haversack.

He was then ready for business, and first of all, made a tour of inspection around the mighty fence, stopping now and then and endeavoring to peer between the cracks, without avail. The darkness inside preventing his seeing anything of the interior.

Upon the southern side he found two ponderous gates, made like the fence of heavy plank, and barred on the inside. Here, evidently, was the only entrance and exit of the Ranch.

Here, also, Gold Rifle saw the fresh imprint of horses' hoofs, showing that some one had recently entered the yard from off the prairie.

Going all around the Ranch, he arrived at the spot he had started from, and throwing off his outer, or hunting, jacket, he set silently and noiselessly to work.

With his stout hunting-knife, he cut out in square cakes a large space of snow crust, taking care to work under the dark shadow of the fence.

These cakes he made about two feet square, and when piled over they had a solid thickness of about five inches, and were all a person would care to carry. After cutting over a hundred of these, a task which occupied fully an hour, he carried them close to the fence, and began piling them up in order of a stairs, until he had elevated them so that by standing on the last step he could just peer over the top of the fence.

In two minutes after the completion of his novel snow stairs, he had drawn himself up on the top of the fence, and giving a hurried glance, he dropped lightly down into the yard—and into the grasp of half a dozen men who had all the time been crouching in a black shadow.

In vain the young detective fought to free himself from the iron grasp upon him, and to get at one of his revolvers. But he might as well have tried to raise the earth.

He was borne down upon the snow, and bound securely, hand and foot, and then carried between four brawny outlaws into the Black Ranch, which was a monster building, roughly constructed and glistening in its midnight color. In through a series of halls and entries, and then finally the captors halted in the center of a long wide apartment, furnished only with rude settees.

Gold Rifle was placed on one of these, and allowed the privilege of sitting up.

The room was brilliantly lighted with chandeliers containing lamps, and the young detective had a chance to see who his captors were.

One he remembered of having seen at the Christmas turkey shoot, and heard addressed as Jacob Toleman—one of the foremost in denouncing Gold Rifle as the outlaw, Tiger Track.

The others were masked, but that they were some of the trader's pals there could be no doubt.

The trader advanced now, a devilish expression of jubilation upon his face.

"Ha! ha! you young hawk, you didn't escape us so nice, after all, did ye?" he leered. "You put yourself in our man-trap, neatly. Now, then, I don't intend ter spend much breath over ye, but I've got a few questions ter ask ye. Ye're Wild Walt Wagner's kid—that we know. Now, then, whar's yer dad?"

"Find out, and you'll know!" retorted Gold Rifle. "I'll not tell ye."

"All right; we won't urge you. Search him, boys, and then cast him into the pit, without bonds. He can't never git out—that's bin proven."

A hurried search of Gold Rifle's clothing was accordingly made, and an old letter found and handed to Jacob Toleman. He tore it open, and perused it eagerly, his villainous countenance assuming a more diabolical expression. When he had finished he said:

"It's a couple of months old, but here's what it says:

"DEAR SON:—When this reaches you I shall have left our mountain home, and taken the gold to a safer hiding place. On my return, I have a great mission to perform—this is to rescue your dear mother and my wife from captivity. Only yesterday I got an inkling that she whom we have so long mourned as dead, is living and a prisoner in Tiger Track's stronghold. If you can do anything, do it quickly, for our mutual sake. YOUR FATHER."

"So ye thought you'd come and search for yer mother, did ye, boy? Well, we're goin' ter give ye a chance, among the human skeletons as will keep you company in the pit. D'ye know whar Wild Walt is?"

"No! I wouldn't tell, if I did!" returned Gold Rifle indignantly. "He'll be the death of you, yet."

No more was said; the four men pounced upon him, and though he struggled with all his power, they bore him to a well-like opening in the center of the floor, and pitched him over into it, headforemost.

Down—down—down went the young sharpshooter into the black depths, and the four ruffians turned away with horrible chuckles, as though the work were nothing unusual to them—a sort of by-play to pass away time.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE EARTH—GOLD RIFLE'S ACTION.

WHEN Gold Rifle found himself going down headforemost into the pit of darkness, he felt sure that he was going to his death, yet had the presence of mind to make a desperate attempt to turn over, so that he would strike upon his feet.

Whether or not he succeeded, he never knew; all he realized was a terrible jar, then a blank came, and he knew no more.

How long he lay in this condition of course he could not tell, but at last there came an awakening.

He opened his eyes. Everything that had passed came clearly to him, and in a second he knew that he had been cast into the pit beneath the Ranch.

For many minutes he lay perfectly quiet, fearful to move lest that act should bring to him the discovery that some limb had been broken or misplaced. He could feel no soreness as he lay upon the ground, and after awhile came to the conclusion that he was not hurt at all, and with an effort rose to his feet.

He now found that he had sustained no injuries otherwise than a severe shock which had made his lower limbs rather stiff, and that he was still better than half a dozen dead men.

He stood for many minutes at loss what to do. Around him all was Stygian gloom. He could not even see his hand in front of his face. Above, many hundred feet, it seemed, was a tiny round speck of light, and this he knew emanated from the room of the Black Ranch, from which he had been hurled into the pit.

He was in a hole, deep down in the bowels of the earth, which was intended as his tomb.

That others had died here was plainly evidenced by the terrible stench that prevailed—a deathly, sickening odor of decaying bodies. A horrible place it was, and a shudder escaped Gold Rifle, as he breathed the foul atmosphere.

"Ugh!" he muttered, half fearing to stir; "this is about their worst dose of perfume I ever got. What's to be did? that's the question before their Investigation Committee. A feller can't remain long in this stench and live; and as long's I'm hull-boned yet, I ain't a-going to say die. The first requisite is a light, and I have the very article of production in my coat-sleeve pocket, which is handier than a pocket in a shirt. Glad them chaps were kind enough to leave my hands and feet free."

Bending over, he fumbled in his capacious right coat-sleeve, which contained a leathern pocket, and soon produced a half of a sperm candle and some matches. One of these he struck upon his sleeve, and then ignited the candle, and had a bright light, which illuminated the bottom of the pit with startling distinctness.

What he saw was but evidence of what he had been given reason to expect. He was in a tomb, deep down in the bowels of the earth—a place of the dead, rather than the living. All around were strewn skeletons, skulls, and half-decayed corpses—close at hand lay a body that apparently had not yet entered into decomposition—that of a man past forty years of age.

At one side of the pit was a deep hole in the bottom, with a body half-dragged into it, and close at hand lay a shovel and a pick.

To Gold Rifle, the meaning of this was quite plain. The stench rising out of the pit being too great in the Ranch above, a man had been sent down by the outlaws to bury the dead, but weakening when the

job was half complete the fellow had backed out, and left his tools behind him.

And to Gold Rifle this was next to a reprieve, for he knew in an instant that the pick and shovel meant life and liberty to him.

Sticking the candle into a thumb-denture in the wall, he seized the shovel and began rolling the decayed bodies into the grave. It was a trying piece of work, and any man but one with iron nerves must have fainted in the stench around. But, working for life and liberty ever lends to man extraordinary endurance, and at last the job was finished; every corpse, or evidence thereof, was rolled into the grave, and the dirt piled copiously upon them.

As a natural result, the stench in the pit became less and less offensive, and in half an hour the atmosphere below was quite breathable. At least, it seemed so to Gold Rifle, after the sickening ordeal he had passed through.

His candle was burning low, and having but one more in his pocket, he knew that he must needs get to work toward escaping.

He had already formed his plans; for his hands and brains had each been busy. He would cut a spiral stairway of steps around the pit, from the bottom to the top! It was fully thirty feet to the floor above, but what of that? Life, liberty, vengeance, all awaited his exertions. He had faith in his success to work out his fully-formed plan, by aid of the shovel and his hunting-knife—for, strange to say, the outlaws had not deprived him of his weapons.

So commencing, he cut a deep indenture into the ground siding, and worked from that, step by step. The ground was of tenacious clay, but this was all the better for him, as it made his staircase of earth all the stronger.

With all his strength he worked away, throwing the soft dirt into the bottom of the pit, and thereby effectually shutting out the scent of the dead bodies. By the time his candle was half-spent, he had two circles of his stair-case completed, and was about half-way up from the bottom of the pit.

Although much fatigued by his exhaustive labor, he did not pause but kept determinedly on, for he knew that he must needs accomplish the remaining distance while his light held out, and he calculated the candle, which was a whole one, would last about six hours, in all.

The hour and minute hands of his watch pointed to the hour of twelve, but he was unable to tell whether it was noon, or midnight, not knowing how long he had been insensible.

Believing by the state of his stomach that it must be noon, he paused long enough to partake of the scraps of venison which were in his haversack. He then went on digging resolutely, and worked until he found that he must yield to exhaustion, and rest. He accordingly ceased his work, and digging out a deep hole in the dirt, encoined himself in it, and went off into a sound, refreshing sleep, first, however, blowing out his candle.

When he awoke, a couple of hours later, he felt greatly refreshed and strengthened, and set to work again. For two hours he labored, and then, when he was within ten feet of the opening into the room above, his candle wholly expired.

But this was not so great a disappointment now, as sufficient light for his purpose came down from above. Right here he dug out, in addition to his staircase, a large, deep cavity in the earth siding of the pit, in what he concluded was the northern side. He spent several hours in its construction, for he meant that it should be large enough so that two persons could move about handily.

Two persons—for with remarkable daring his formed plans now included the rescue of his mother, and escape by way of this very pit!

After he had completed the little cave, he proceeded to complete his staircase, working carefully, and with as little noise as possible, for there was now danger of being overheard by the outlaws, should any of them chance to be in the room overhead.

Therefore, though swiftly, he worked silently, and in the course of half an hour he had attained a standing position from whence he could grasp the floor rim above with his two hands without falling, so that it would be an easy matter to draw himself up out of the now half filled pit.

But this he was not anxious to do immediately. He had been caught by the outlaws once, and if he was to be caught again, he meant that it should not be for lack of precaution on his part.

Finishing the last step necessary, he returned to his little cave, ten feet below, and sat down to rest and listen. From here almost everything going on in the room overhead could be distinctly heard.

Some time elapsed before Gold Rifle heard any sound; then came the tramp of heavy-booted feet, and a man peered over into the pit, with a strange, hollow laugh. Directly afterward, the lights in the room were turned low, and Gold Rifle heard the fellow tramp away.

"Humph!" he muttered, "I guess the coast is clear now, and I can go up safely. Reckon that chap was a guard, and it will be my duty to silence him if he gets in my way. The room above evidently is not used except on occasions when the band meets to try a fellow-mortal for some offense, and chuck him down into the pit."

Leaving the shovel in the cave, and arranging his knife and revolvers in a convenient position, the young detective set out on his daring venture. By the power of his strong young arms he drew himself up out of the pit into the room. He was now free, in one sense—free from imprisonment in that deep, darksome earth-dungeon.

It will be remembered that he left his boots in the snow, outside of the great fence; therefore he could now move nearly noiselessly, clad in his thick, warm moccasins.

Gliding into one corner of the room where the shadows were the thickest, he crouched down upon one of the rude settees and waited. He had as yet not fixed upon any plan of immediate action, but he knew that it was necessary that he should, for he could not remain long undiscovered. Indeed, he now heard the clumsy-footed guard coming back, with muttered curses upon some object which he had dropped.

"Ken't be I drapped it inter ther pit!" he growled, tramping into the room, and approaching the black hole in the floor. "Wouldn't 'a' lost that plug o' terbaccy for a counterfeit dollar, 'ca'se thar ain't no more in ther Ranch, ef old Jim Bender, the quarter-master, don't lie. Kinder 'spect Jim's hid ther weed fer his own use, and wants ter make ther b'yees go w'out, durn his old hide, an'—"

"Halt! One move or word and you die!" came a low command, accompanied by the click, click, of a revolver lock. "Stand perfectly still, without looking either way, or over you go into that pit, eend over eend, as sure's thar's strength enough in six fellers to put ye thar."

The guard obeyed, with a muttered curse. He dare not disobey, when he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver touch the back of his neck.

With the strong deer thong straps which he always carried in his pocket, Gold Rifle securely bound the ruffian's hands behind him, and then wheeled him around so that they faced each other.

"There ye are, my man!" he said, with a chuckle, "taken a prisoner just as nice as you please. Couldn't have done it better yourself, could you?—There! take care ye don't speak loud, or I'll send you where they have brimstone hash for board. Now, then, since you're my prisoner, I have a perfect right to subject you to a rigorous course of questioning which may not be at all to your liking, but which you must swallow and digest as you would a sugar-coated pill.

"And also you must answer every question, and if you don't, and go a-tryin' ter yell, or talk loud to attract attention, or any dodge games, down goes your shanty into that pit o' the dead, like a double-distilled thunderbolt! D'ye hear?"

The man assented by a nod of his head. He knew it wasn't his trump flop, yet.

CHAPTER X.

QUESTIONING—FALSE HAIR—PLAYING GUARD—A CAPTURE AND ESCAPE INTO THE CAVE.

"WELL, then," continued Gold Rifle, gliding away, and closing the door which the guard had left open, and also turning on a greater power of light from the lamps, "the first question I shall ask you is what is your name? Answer in a low prompt tone, and you'll not be harmed."

"My name's Mose Renfrau!" was the sullen response.

"Mose Renfrau, eh? Do you belong to Tiger Track's outlaws?"

"No—I belong to Gang 2."

"What's that?"

"The gang w'at works inside. The outlaws ar' No. 1, and hev nothin' ter do w'it us fellers."

"Oh! that's the lay-out is it? You're a guard then?"

"Yes! I have charge of the whole building—a beat through every hall to see that all is right."

"Do you ever enter the rooms?"

"Ov course; I hev ter give ther signal and they let me in."

"What is the signal?"

"Go find out—I'll not tell ye."

"You won't, eh?" Gold Rifle reminded, seizing him and forcing him forward toward the hole of the pit—"then down ye go, end over end."

The fellow's face assumed a white, scared look as he was confronted by the yawning abyss, and he trembled in every limb.

"Yes! yes! I'll tell," he gasped, his teeth chattering, "only don't shove me down in that grave. What is it you want to know?"

"The signal you spoke of."

"Well, it is five successive light raps upon the door. One feller never speaks ter ernuther, durin' workin' hours."

Gold Rifle gazed at the guard sharply, to see if he was lying, but he was evidently not, judging from his countenance. But, one thing did not escape the lynx eyes of the young detective—a ragged edge of hide where the hair and beard met above the ear.

"See here!" he exclaimed, grimly, "you ain't ther chap ye seem, at all. What means this?" and with his hands he jerked off first a long false beard, and then a wig of hair.

"What kind of a crooked game are ye tryin' ter play, anyhow?"

The man swore roundly in French, and his eyes looked like balls of fire. Shorn of his hirsute possessions, he appeared a man of thirty-five, smooth-faced, and the very photograph of all that was evil.

"You may as well out with it," said Gold Rifle, "for I know that you are not here without an object. You are under disguise, and have some plan afoot, or you would not be here. Needn't be afraid to tell me, for I'm a detective, and don't want anything more to do with you than can be helped. What are you here for, you rascal?"

"To kill Tiger Track, the outlaw!" replied the man, fiercely. "I have been here a year for that purpose, and still Tiger Track lives."

"What wrong has he ever done you?"

"Ruined my wife, and afterward murdered her to get rid of her. Do you not think I ought to hate him?"

"I should say yes. And now, are we to be friends or enemies? You evidently care nothing for the band, except to accomplish your object; I am here to rescue my mother who has long been a prisoner

in Tiger Track's power. You can let me have your place as guard, until I get her free, and then assume this disguise again for your own plans."

"Correct; but where will I stay during all that time?"

"Down in the pit. The dead are all far under the ground and there is no smell. You can remain there, and I will lower you down provisions. If a day goes by without your hearing from me, you can come up by aid of a stairway I have cut into the earth. You will find your trappings in this room."

They talked at considerable length, and after giving Gold Rifle all the information possible, Renfrau consented to be lowered into the pit, on conditions that Gold Rifle would not forget the food. This the young detective promised, and procuring a long, stout rope, he lowered the Frenchman into the pit.

He then donned the wig and false beard, after which he closely resembled the man whose place he was usurping. The first round he made of the beat, he was watchful and ready for defense, should his assumption be detected. He passed several men in the long halls of the Ranch, but none of them paid the least attention to him.

After making half a dozen rounds, according to Renfrau's directions, he repaired to the cook-room and got his morning meal, which consisted of venison and corn-dodgers, for which he had a strong relish. So strong, in fact, that he managed to store away five of the dodgers in his pockets.

These he dropped down to Renfrau, on his return to the audience-room.

Of the elder Toleman he had seen nothing, and no one mentioned him. The outlaws, he found to occupy quarters in the south-eastern part of the building, where they remained, hardly ever venturing into any other parts.

A day and a night passed, and still Gold Rifle remained on guard duty. The larger part of the day he was allowed to sleep, as there were plenty astrir throughout the Ranch; night was when his services came into requisition.

Although he had been nearly all through the Ranch, he had not stumbled upon the room which contained the imprisoned Agnes Wagner, his long-lost mother. Renfrau had told him that she was somewhere in the great building, but even he did not know exactly where.

But there was one discovery he had made—one which no one outside the outlaw clique had ever suspected.

The Black Ranch was in reality a counterfeiters' den, where base coin was manufactured and finished for the market.

Gold Rifle had been in five rooms devoted to its manufacture, the first being the molding, the second the sizing, the third the stamping and the fourth the weighing and perfecting room. The fifth apartment was the store and boxing-room, and also the office.

As near as he could learn, without betraying himself with over-inquisitiveness, Gold Rifle concluded that the counterfeiting had been going on for nearly six months, during which time over twenty thousand dollars' worth of the spurious coin had been successfully "flooded" and still the counterfeiters had twice that amount on hand for future use.

They only worked at the dead of night—from eleven o'clock until day-dawn; then the counterfeiting-rooms were locked up, and the men, some eighteen or twenty in number, scattered to their various rooms throughout the building.

There was a bar in one room, and this was the general resort of all within the Black Ranch.

Moreover, Gold Rifle learned that a squad of ten men constantly acted as pickets in the yard outside of the building, and a man kept watch in the tower.

And he saw that it would be next to impossible for him to escape, unless it was as he had designed, by tunneling out in under the Ranch.

This he resolved to do, as soon as possible after finding his prize, the imprisoned Agnes Wagner.

For the day following he had no occupation, and in these hours, when there was no danger of their being discovered, both he and Renfrau worked at the tunnel, for the Frenchman saw that it might serve him as an avenue of escape, after he had completed his meditated vengeance on Tiger Track.

About six o'clock in the evening Gold Rifle resumed his guard duty, but Renfrau kept on digging.

In one of his rounds through the halls on the second floor of the Ranch, the young detective heard a groan, and approaching close to the door nearest him, he paused and listened. There were voices inside, engaged in conversation. It was evidently a man and a woman, and the man was speaking, in the unmistakable tones of Jacob Toleman.

"There! there! shet up yer blubbering, woman, over that brat o' ourn. Et cum ter ther settlement, an' I had it brained as I told you I would, ef you ever tried any games to escape. I reckon ye'll find out after awhile that I'm master!" When I stole ye away from Alf King, or Boover Legree, as he's now known, I thort I war gettin' a lamb, 'ca'se ye'allers appeared so while ye war Wild Walt's wife; but I soon found ther difference!"

"Yes, you brute! you found that I was yet a woman, and would fight for my power. It's now many years, Dolph Carew, since I saw the light of the outer world, but God be praised, I believe it will not be much longer. I am inspired with a faith that I shall either die, or be rescued from this terrible incarceration!"

"Ha! ha! you are getting wild again, Aggie—out o' yer right mind. Why, you old fool, who do you suppose could rescue you from this impregnable prison? You are here for your life—my wife, my star, if I choose to make ye."

"Your wife? God forbid! The bonds which you forced upon me were but a horrible mockery in the sight of heaven, for I have a husband living. No!

no! you need not leer and scoff, for Wild Walt still lives, and I shall be again his ere long. Something tells me so, and I cannot drive off the impression. It clings to me by day and by night."

"An' I'll hev ter keep a-clingin', fer all ther good it will do you. I see Legree, a few days ago, an' he's as hot as ever at Tiger Track fer stealin' ye. Legree is a very devil!"

"But an angel, compared with you, you wretch!" was the retort.

"I know I'm not an angel!" replied the villain, with a malignant chuckle. "Indeed, it is one of the greatest delights of my life to worry and torment you—to make your existence a foretaste of hell. That is because I love you so. But I cannot tarry longer, now, for I must away to other work. General Maynard, your father, I may as well tell you, will soon make an attempt to take this Ranch, with the vain hope of repossessing himself of you. He has but a handful of men—one to our three—and inside of twenty-four hours from now, if they approach near, their bodies 'll make coyote fodder. So good by, you she-tigress cub, and may your dreams hereafter not be so silly. Your days are doomed to be spent within these dismal walls, and when you die I shall cremate you, and retain your ashes as a souvenir, in a glass case at the head of my bed!"

With a horrible laugh the ruffian turned, and Gold Rifle heard him coming toward the door.

He stepped to one side, an expression of grim determination upon his face, his eyes gleaming forth the pent-up anger that was in his breast.

"I'll baste the inhuman beast one rap," he muttered, seizing a hickory walking-stick, which stood near. "If I can't drop him, I've got a knife to finish him with, aside from as noisy a pair of revolvers as ever cracked. I dare not use them here, however."

Nearer the ruffian came, and Gold Rifle seized his stick firmly.

There was much depending, now, and he resolved to be the victor when he had the chance. The key turned in the lock, the door opened, and the elder Toleman, or Dolph Carew, as the prisoner had called him, stepped out into the hall.

Then came a whiz and a whack of the club, and without even a groan the old ruffian dropped to the floor.

Gold Rifle did not pause to see if he was seriously hurt or not, but seizing him by the heels, dragged him back into the room occupied by the prisoner.

"Come!" he said, turning to her, and beholding a pale, sickly-looking woman, of eight-and-thirty years. "If you would escape from this living death, come with me, for I am your son, come to rescue you, my long-lost mother!" And he advanced toward her with outstretched arms.

"My son!" she gasped, rising toward him, her eyes shining gloriously with a new-born hope. "My God, can this be true, or am I going mad—mad—mad?"

"You are not wrong, dear mother!" the young detective replied, kissing her tenderly, "for if you are Agnes Wagner, the wife of Wild Walt, I am your son, whom you have not seen since he was a little boy. But come, dear mother, we must not tarry here, for you probably well know the men who surround us!"

"Oh, God! I have not prayed to Thee in vain for aid, and you have sent me a noble gift which overwhelms me with gratitude toward Thee. Yes, come, my son, for I would not longer tarry in this horrible confinement. Is he dead?" with a motion toward the senseless ruffian.

"No, I think not, so I will lock him in this room, that he may have a taste of what you have experienced, here!" Gold Rifle said, grimly.

He hastily gathered up a bundle of wraps and clothing, which caught his eye, and then led the way out into the hall, locking the door after them. Then they cautiously descended the stairs, and made their way through a labyrinth of halls, most luckily not encountering any one of the enemy.

On reaching the pit room, Gold Rifle by Renfrau's assistance, succeeded in getting Mrs. Wagner safely down into the little cave in the side of the pit; then Gold Rifle went to the cook room, and succeeded in capturing a large haunch of venison, already roasted for the morrow's meals.

This he took down into the little cave, and then Renfrau received back his disguise and went on guard duty above, the same as at first, promising to warn the young detective in case of danger.

After slicing up the venison, and secreting it about his person, Gold Rifle set desperately at work in tunneling toward the river shore, which Renfrau had already well started!

CHAPTER XI.

OUT OF EARTH—ON THE ICE AND A RACE FOR LIFE—IN THE PATH OF AN AVALANCHE.

DETERMINED now was Gold Rifle to escape, for he had a dear mother to care for, and he worked away with a will.

The dirt was now light and loamy, being so near the surface, and he made rapid headway. When it was about morning, he ceased his labors for a few moments, and with Mrs. Wagner partook of some of the venison he had captured.

He then went at it again, and by noon he concluded by a gurgling sound just in front of him, that he was almost through. So he paused, and went back to the little cave in the dirt, at the commencement of the tunnel, where he had left his mother. He found the guard, Renfrau, here, also, waiting anxiously to know the result of the labor.

"I guess I'm nearly through," Gold Rifle answered, to his inquiry, "but whether I shall come out above or under the ice, I do not yet know. I shall not break out until darkness again. How is it outside?"

"Sharp and clear, with moonless nights. You'll

get off, easy enough, an' I wish ye God speed, an' the ledly too."

The guard then took his departure, and Gold Rifle and his mother waited anxiously for the coming of darkness.

During the time intervening, they found much to say to each other, and Mrs. Wagner was greatly overjoyed to learn that her husband was alive and somewhere in the West. The knowledge was consoling to her.

The afternoon passed quickly, and when by his watch he knew it was growing dark, Gold Rifle led the way into the tunnel, and on reaching the spot where he had left off digging, he set to work to break through the remaining dirt.

It was an easy matter, for a few shovelfuls of dirt only were taken out, ere a dull light shone in. Peering out of the aperture, he gave an exultant little cry, for his calculations had been so correct, that they would come out fair and even upon the ice. In five minutes he had the hole large enough to admit of their egress, and they breathed the pure air of freedom.

Before them stretched the night and a snowy wilderness.

And they had now to depend upon their feet to bear them away from the terrible den that had so long been Agnes Wagner's prison.

"Oh! God be praised," she murmured, as she gazed out over the boundless view of crystal white, and up at the heavens, where a few pale stars were twinkling. "This is the grandest, most grateful sight that has greeted my eyes for many long years. It seems like coming out of a dark world into a brighter one."

"And so it will be to you, dearest mother, for I shall and others will strive to make your future life most happy and bright. You will remain, please, while I skulk around the neighborhood and get my boots and rifle, which I left outside the fence ere I attempted to enter the Ranch and got caught. I won't be long."

"But you are going into peril again, my son."

"No, I am not risking much, dear mother, and will soon return."

So saying Gold Rifle crept from the hole out into the open air, and along in the shadow of the creek bank. Above him towered the shadows of the great Ranch surrounded as it was by its black, high fence. Everything looked about the same to the young scout-detective, as when he had entered, now some forty-eight hours before.

Stealthily he crept along the bank several yards, and then came upon his rifle, securely hidden in the sage bushes.

Leaving it, he crawled along over the snow toward the fence, near where he had scaled it, for it was here he had buried his boots. It was a daring venture, but he was aware that he must have them, in order to escape. Inch by inch he crept along, expecting every minute to get a challenge, or a bullet in his brain.

But luck was with him, and without evident discovery he found and pulled on his boots. He was about to retreat, when his eye caught sight of an object close at hand, and his heart gave a jump when he saw that it was a medium-sized frame hand-sled, with half a lasso attached.

It had evidently been left there by some ranch hand; yet, it occurred to Gold Rifle, might it not be a decoy? It was just the very thing he wanted to draw his mother upon, still he hesitated and lay upon the snow, watching with the eyes of a lynx.

"Reckon a feller can't more'n try, anyhow!" he muttered, at last, "an' ef I am discovered, I calculate w'y my skates on I kin outrun 'em."

Creeping forward he grasped the lariat and began creeping hastily toward the river, pulling the sled behind him. Without accident he reached the ice, and securing his rifle and skates, he advanced along up to the hole. Here he found Mrs. Wagner awaiting anxiously.

"Had you any trouble?"

"No, but I opine we'd better be gittin' out of this, ively. 'Twon't be long before there'll be a rumpus in the enemies' camp. You get on the sled, while I am putting on these skates, and we'll soon be off."

"Hark! listen! a shout!" exclaimed Mrs. Wagner, breathlessly, pointing into the hole. Quickly Gold Rifle sprang to the opening, and listened for a repetition.

It came booming along through the tunnel, a moment later, in a hoarse, deep voice—the voice of the guardsman, Renfray:

"Fly! fly! they've discovered yer flight—look out fer 'em, a good seven dozen strong. Fly!"

"As I expected!" Gold Rifle muttered, with a grim contraction of his brows. "We've got to git, in shape."

He finished buckling on his skates, then placing Mrs. Wagner upon the sled, he wrapped her warmly in the blankets he had fetched from the Ranch.

Every minute now seemed an hour until they should get started.

"Now hang on!" he said, and seizing the lariat he started down over the ice, drawing the sled behind him. The track lay before him like a monster reach of glass, and a spirit of joy was the young sharp-shooter's, as he was able to dart away from the outlaw den, at a much faster speed than he could go on the snow.

He could hear the shouts and curses of the outlaws, and knew that they had discovered his escape, and the route he had taken, but he resolved to distance them, nor give up in the attempt.

"They've got only one possible chance to head us off," he muttered, and that's below here, a couple of miles in the sharp bend of the river. By going overland on horseback, they can perhaps get there ahead of me. But, not if I can help it."

He set his teeth hard together, and darted on over the smooth surface like a flying bird, never pausing once to look back or around him. Not until he was approaching near to the bend; then he came to a halt.

"What is the matter?" inquired Mrs. Wagner, anxiously. "Is there danger?"

"Yes, to advance further on the river. A whole gang of the outlaws are concealed around a bend down yonder, and we shall have to leave the ice."

He was not long in making the decision, but pulled the sled up onto the strong snow crust on the western side of the river.

"You had better let me get off and walk," said Mrs. Wagner, anxiously. "I have considerable strength on occasions like this."

"No! no! you sit still. I can make better time drawing you than if you were to walk. The crust holds up perfectly under my skates, and I shall keep them on."

It was too dark to see anything of the enemy, so he set out over the prairie at a brisk speed, the stiff crust answering nearly the same purpose of the ice, for skating.

For several hours he toiled on, pulling his precious prize behind him, determined to keep a-going as long as his strength held out.

But at last he was obliged to succumb to fatigue, and came to a halt in a small belt of timber on the top of a prairie crest.

"I'm goin' to stop here till daylight, anyhow," he said, puffing and panting from his over-exertions. "I don't reckon the devils will get my trail before that time. We must have come fully eight miles from the river, if not more."

He did not build a fire, although the night was cold, for this would be certain to attract his enemies to the spot, but wrapping all the blankets snugly around poor Mrs. Wagner, he threw himself flat upon the crust, face downward, and went off into a sound sleep, trusting to his instinct to arouse him in case of danger.

Gold Rifle slept on undisturbedly until close upon day-dawn, when he awoke, ready for the day's labor, come it in what shape it might.

Arousing his mother, who had not suffered much from the cold, he gave her some of the venison he had fetched along, and they both satisfied the cravings of their appetites.

"We will wait a little longer, till the darkness entirely clears away, for I want to get a view of the surrounding prairie!" Gold Rifle said. "This must be the highest point for several leagues around, as I remember, and I can see the outlaws if they are anywhere on the prairie, within eye-shot. The mountains of the Little Panther range cannot be far back of us."

"And, is there where you are going, my son?"

"If I am pursued, yes. Otherwise, I shall cut around, and make for the fort, of which your father has command."

The darkness cleared away rapidly, now, and the light of a clear, crisp day dawned over the snow wilderness. And the sight that was presented to the view of Gold Rifle was little more than he expected.

The outlaws were at the spot where he had left the ice, some five miles to the eastward, and were just starting out upon his trail. He saw this much, by aid of his glass; but he also made a discovery that was in a degree, encouraging.

There were but about a score of the pursuers, all told. The remainder of the outlaw gang had evidently taken another course.

"Can you see the Black Ranch, my dear?" Mrs. Wagner asked, coming out to the edge of the timber, where Gold Rifle was standing.

"One corner of its roof—no! it's the tower of the Ranch, 'way off yonder. The remainder of the place is hidden behind a prairie swell, greater than this. But come; we must not tarry here, but must recommence the race. The outlaws are already beginning pursuit, where we left the ice, and I wish to reach the mountains ere we stop again."

Mrs. Wagner again resumed her position upon the sled, and seizing the lariat, Gold Rifle set out briskly to the westward.

No halt was made, but he pushed determinedly on toward a high mountain peak which loomed up before them in the distance, looking like a giant specter in its sheet of pure white.

"There's a cave half-way up that mountain side, if I remember!" the young detective said, as they advanced, "for I think that is the Elk or Earthquake peak I've heard old Alva Lanche tell about, down at Yankton. If we can get in the cave, we'll be all right, and can fight off the varmints until they git sick."

But in the course of a half-hour, a new change appeared. The heavens suddenly became overcast with a dull gray color, and snow began to fall fast and thick, every flake counting, being as large nearly as a nickel. Evidently a severe storm was at hand.

A stern expression came over Gold Rifle's features, and Mrs. Wagner noticed it, at once.

"What is it?" she questioned. "Will not this snow cover up our trail?"

"Yes, and us, too, unless we strike cover inside of

"*Many of my readers will say, doubtless—'Why I should think he would have frozen, lying there?' But my answer is, no! Several winters ago, I had occasion to try the experiment, at the suggestion of an old woodsman, for we were out where neither shelter nor fire was to be had. I laid down, and being fatigued, dropped into a sleep which lasted until morning, when I was awakened, very much refreshed, not feeling the cold, scarcely at all. I have often since tried to study out the reason of my not freezing, but gave it up as a mystery."

two hours," was the disquieting reply. "Et's goin' ter be an old snorter, such as ye read about!"

He increased his walk to a run, and kept on, while the white flakes came down in dense clouds, covering them perfectly white.

On—on, resolutely, yet doubtfully, and at last they arrived at the foothills of the mountains, but to their disappointment not a tree was there to offer them shelter. And the snow came down faster and faster; it had already fallen to the depth of a foot, and still no signs of cessation.

"Get off and let me assist you!" Gold Rifle said; "we shall have to try and hunt up the cave, up in the mountain side, or perish in the snow!"

They began the steep rocky ascent, which was nearly perpendicular, and gained an altitude of fifty feet, or more; then stopped with white scared faces, as they heard a strange humming, rushing roar, above them—something awful in its import:

"My God, we are in the path of an avalanche!" Gold Rifle exclaimed!

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE PRAIRIE—RUFFIANS AND RED-SKINS.

THE man whom General Maynard had engaged as guide into the Black Ranch country, was in many respects an "odd 'un" on the side of human character. He was evidently along in the forties, strong and muscularly built, with a quick sharp glance for every new object, and a habitual watchfulness about himself, lest he should be stricken by an enemy, or should betray himself.

He was one of those old roving spirits who had spent a lifetime on the border, and seen rough life in nearly all its different phases; was a man of liberal education, evidently, but uncouth and eccentric of speech as a general thing.

Little of his face could be seen for the heavy beard that swept nearly to his belt, and at a glance into his black, gleaming eyes, one would say that he was not the man to brook insult or much offense.

He gave his name to General Maynard as Old Steuben, and by this title he was made known to the whole party.

After leaving the farm-house, the cavalcade struck into a sharp gallop, and headed due westward into the pure white of the snow-bound West.

All of the party were mounted upon steeds whose powers of endurance had had many a test, and whose speed was hard to equal; and therefore there was a jolly spirit prevailing. Perhaps, more than all else, it was because pretty May Maynard headed the band, looking gay and bright in her artistic costume—for she was now a man among them, and every man could have well wished her their captain.

Old Steuben rode on in advance, grimly silent and uncommunicative, except when questioned.

The man seemed to have some burden resting upon his mind, some secret which caused the reserve, which was one his personal peculiarities.

May noticed this, and her tender young heart kindled toward him, for his quiet withdrawal from the rest of the men, looked as if none were friendly to him.

"Are you lonely without company, sir?" she asked, galloping forward to his side. "I should think you would be."

"Eh? lonesome, my ledly? No, I don't reckon I am, more'n usual. Kinder nateral to me, ye see—this preference for solitude. 'Tain't many ladies as comes ter talk ter an' old nut like me."

"That is because they are so blind as not to see that men oftentimes are found under the rudest covering, sir," was the reply.

God bless ye, young lady, fer thar's more truth in 'em words than ye'd suppose. Thar was a time when Old Steuben held as much style as any o' ther boyees, but life on this frontier 'll soon take ther polish an' starch out o' a feller."

May could but be impressed with his words, and saw that there was a sound, deeply sensible man, under the rough exterior of Old Steuben.

They traveled along swiftly in the afternoon's sunlight, making a picturesque sight as they trailed over the white winding-sheet of the prairie.

About sundown they came in sight of a "prairie island," or motte of timber, several miles ahead, and General Maynard signaled to the scout, who approached respectfully.

"You see the timber ahead, scout—would that not form us an admirable camping-ground for the night?"

"Yes, general, if it is not already occupied by ther enemy. Them 'ar mottes ar' generally occupied, in sech weather, by red-skins, or ruffians o' sum sort, an' they'll be sure ter fight fer their grounds."

"True, but I don't fancy the notion of camping down in the open. Is there not another of these islands where we can find shelter, by a few hours more of brisk ride?"

"Most likely, sir, and we will strike off a little more to the north, curving gradually in that direction. But here, let me call yer attention ter sumthin' w'ch I reckon hes escaped yer eyes. D'ye know thet we're follered?"

"Follered? no! by whom, pray?"

"Dunno, sir, fer my eyes won't reach fur enough ter let me find out. But thar they are, about six miles back in the rear—jest in plain sight, now!"

All hands turned in their saddles, and gazed back over the ocean of white, in search of the sail of life, and, sure enough, two horsemen were seen far in the distance, on the crest of a prairie swell.

"They've follered us frum ther settlement!" said Old Steuben, "an' I reckon they're up ter sum deviltry, or they'd hurry an' ketch up."

"I cannot imagine who it is, unless some of Tiger Track's men were in the settlement, when we left," said General Maynard, anxiously.

"Your idear is probably kerect!" replied the

General Maynard growled, with a head-shake. "I'm of the opinion that we're in for a hard time, before we get out of this. I wish I'd left you at home, May, where you'd have had comfort and warmth, instead of peril and cold to submit to."

"Ishaw! papa, you needn't worry about me!" May replied, with a little ripple of laughter, "for I'm warm, and all right. I prefer this wild sport to being penned up in the house. Don't fear but what I'd complain if I had any cause."

"I don't b'lieve you would, you're such a plucky little thing!" the old officer replied, riding ahead a little to join Steuben.

"Do you think there's any danger of our being snowed under, scout?"

"Dunno, general; ken't tell about that, fer thar's no tellin' what is what, ner when sech a storm as this is goin' ter quit. Reckon ef et snows us under, thar's enough o' us ter dig out, sunhow."

And it did look exceedingly as if there was danger of their being snowed under, for the falling cloud-bursts of snow were gaining in ground depth with astonishing rapidity, and making the labor of the horses severe in the extreme.

But they kept on, under the urge of the scout-tolling along through the blinding storm, whose denseness was something unparalleled.

It was growing darker, too, which looked as if the heavier part of the storm had not yet fallen.

On consideration, it was decided that it would not do to stop now—they must needs keep a-going, at least until the storm abated.

"Bin out in a few storms, myself," observed an old trapper by the name of Deking, "but durm my old picter ef I ever heerd tell o' ther beat o' this. Why, fellers, ef et don't quit afore long, we're goin' ter be entombed alive, afore our time."

"An' hev a funeral at ter ourselves, boys!" chimed in Old Steuben. "One thing we orter be thankful fer—thar ain't many wolves an' buzzards around, this weather, ter pick our bones."

In the terrible blinding storm, it was hardly possible to advance in regularity, and so they scattered somewhat, each one picking a path for himself. It so happened that the trader, Boover Legree, was left unguarded and unnoticed by the rest of the brigade. But with a fiendish expression of satisfaction he followed on, now and then chuckling to himself as he heard May Maynard's clear silvery voice ringing out through the storm, and muttering a curse when he thought of the scout, Old Steuben.

"Ef thet cuss knows me, an' he do fer he called me by name, I do not know him—can't think of an enemy of the past, whom he might be—unless—but 'shaw! that man is dead long ago, although Jake Toleman believes to the contrary. And the girl—Jove! she's a queen to even what Agnes Wagner used to be, and ef I don't possess her ere this storm ceases, may I never be able to raise a villain's hand again!"

And the man laughed low and crafty at some meditated plan of action. He lagged behind all the rest of the brigade, but watched those ahead of him, as well as the storm would permit.

And he saw with great satisfaction, that May Maynard was gradually falling behind the rest, her steed having grown contrary and lazy. She evidently was unmindful of the fact, and had forgotten the existence of a wolf in the fold.

But Legree was not unmindful—he was watching her as the hawk watches its prey—with a gleaming, sinister eye.

He had come from the Settlement with the purpose of capturing May Maynard fully fixed in his mind; Omerhaun had fallen by the daring beauty's fire; but he would not—no! the victim was dropping nearer and nearer, unsuspectingly ignorant that she was not keeping up with the rest.

Until she felt a strong grasp laid upon her shoulder, and looked around to discover that she was alone with the villain Legree her only companion! The brigade had left her behind!

"Help! help!" she screamed.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH OR VICTORY IMPENDING.

"Cuss ye, et won't do ye no good ter screech fer help!" growled Legree, judely clapping his hand over May's mouth. "I'll find ye've fallen inter ther claws of a tiger!"

"I fear you not!" replied May, indignantly, "and I defy you. My friends are not far away, and will answer my cry!"

"Will they, tho'? Mebbe so an' mebbe not. Jest you cum along wi' me, or you'll be sorry; none o' yer screechin', now, ef ye don't wantter get killed, fer once!"

And turning his horse's head sharply from the trail as it ran in a northerly course, he dealt a cruel jab of the spur and roused May's thoroughbred by the bits.

But, when his horse bounded madly forward, May's balked in its tracks, and as a result the trader was jerked backward from the saddle onto the snow.

"Ha! ha! ha! that's the time you didn't make a point!" May exclaimed, with a laugh; then she put her hand to her belt, for a revolver, but to her surprise she did not find one there. They had all been removed, and her knife also.

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Legree, rising from his plunge into the snow.

"He laughs best who laughs last, my dove, with clipped wings. I've got ye jest as completely in my power as I had before!"

"No, sir-ee, you hain't," exclaimed a voice, and who should ride up upon the scene but Josh Hemperhill, the Yankee. "W'en et cumster pss that a man o' no character, or wisdom, or book-learnin', snags

hissell ag'in a man o' solid basis, dubble-duplicate character, as represented by ther Hemperhill family, he allus gits hisself in a box-trap deefkilty. Character airo one o' ther prime accomplishments o' ther H. family, frum old Nebuchadnezzar down to yer 'umble-sarvent, an' we've bin a healthy, prosperous race. Hello! darn my socks! I swow, ef et ain't Miss May and thet cuss I boosted once afore!"

And the eccentric Yankee covered the trader with his revolvers, while a grin of triumph covered his countenance.

"Oh! Josh, is it you? I am so glad you have come!" May cried.

"Yas, I reckon ye must be sum'at tickled, seein's ye war in a fix," Josh replied, with unusual grimness. "Danger generally alters ther opinions o' ther female line. Fer instance, ye war orful tickled when ye got rid o' me, by sendin' me off after Gold Rifle, but I notis Josh cums in mighty welcome about rescue time!"

"Oh! Josh, not quite as bad as that. But, did you find Gold Rifle?"

"Reckon so, an' lost him ag'in. Darn his picter, he left me in a motte ter wait fer his return, but ther outlaws got a leetle too hot, an' so I slid out fer ther fort."

"And what became of Gold Rifle?"

"Dunno. Started fer ther Black Ranch, an' didn't cum back. Guess as how he got gobbled up by ther ruffians, or mebbe he's all hunky. But, where's the rest o' the folks—how'd ye git out hayr?"

"There's more ahead, toward the north—"

"No, they're here, now!" exclaimed a voice, and General Maynard and the brigade rode forward.

"What's the cause of this delay, May, my child?"

"There's the cause, papa!" May replied, pointing to Legree, who was cowering under the bearing of Hemperhill's pistols. "The villain tried to carry me off, but failed when Josh came up and showed his hand."

"I a! is this so? Josh, you're a trump! Boys, seize the accursed ruffian, and bind his hands, and leave him alone here on the prairie, without his horse. If he gets out without freezing or starving, it's all the punishment I care to give him."

The order was executed to a letter, and Legree was left alone in mid-prairie, while the brigade resumed its course, with Josh in company.

May rode by his side, and when no one was near, questioned him concerning Gold Rifle, who was now the center of all interest to her.

"Do you think Gold Rifle was captured by the outlaws, Josh?"

"Dunno! Guess he's smart enough ter hoe his own row."

"What did he say when you gave him the letter?"

"Sumthin' about yer invitin' him ter yer birthday party. Neow, see hyar, Miss May, yer goin' et a leetle ter strong ter suit my notion, an' ef ye don't stop, I'll hev ter sue ye fer breeches o' promis', swow ter gracious ef I won't!"

"Josh, you silly fellow, I hope you don't imagine for a moment that there is any engagement existing between us, or that I love you? No! no! you must not be so blind and foolish. I like and respect you as a friend, and all that, but as for marrying you, I could not think of such a thing."

"Then ye aire fishing after Gold Rifle, eh? Ye calkyate he'll fit yer ideas better'n me, eh?"

"I don't know, Josh; but don't you think we'd make a better match, he being nearer my own age?"

"Yas, mebbe yer right, an' I won't kick so hard ef ye ain't a-goin' ter let Pat Dolan, ther Irisher, inter yer good graces."

"I promise that, Josh, for Pat's at home, and we're off here, and liable to be for some time."

The snow-storm continued with unabated fury, and it grew more and more difficult to urge the horses along, for at every step they sunk deep in the feathery bed.

The cavalcade was wandering on, not knowing exactly the direction all were going—wandering on, to keep from being snowed under, with scarcely an object now, unless it was to find a place of shelter.

Some of the men were growing very much fatigued, and a large number of the horses threatened to play out before long.

"Hark! did you hear that?" demanded General Maynard, as a terrible roar in the distance was distinctly audible, and fairly shook the earth.

"What does it mean, Steuben?"

"Thet war an avalanche w'at heid slid frum topter ther fut o' Earthquake range, which ar' off ter our nor'-west, thirteen or less miles. Heerd 'em afore, an' seen 'em, too. A big mass o' snow gits piled up on their mount'n side, an' a spring o' water in the peak loosens et, an' down she comes lickety scoot. Hope no one warn't going up them mountains then, for et would be a sure funeral ther thet unlucky feller."

Josh at this juncture rode forward in his eccentric way, to give some intelligence.

"Miss May tells me ye're s'archin' fer ther Black Ranch, general. Ef thet's so, ye'd better go keerful, as ye may bunk up ag'in it, kerslap, afore ye know et. Tain't fur ahead," and then Josh related what he knew of Gold Rifle's attempt to penetrate the Ranch.

"The rash youth undoubtedly has received death at the hands of the outlaws for his reckless venture," said General Maynard, anxiously. "He should never have attempted such a feat, except with plenty of aid near at hand to back him."

"Oh! he'll git thar all the same, an' don't ye forget et!" put in Old Steuben, quickly. "I know a few feet o' ther lad, an' he'll bet my rifle he goes through of it's through fire an' water."

"I hope so, truly, scout, for I believe him to be a nephew of mine. But, you have heard Josh's advice."

Had we not better come to a halt, lest we do run unexpectedly upon the Ranch? Such an event would be a disaster to be avoided if possible."

"I think I remember a motte of timber a mile further east, and we will make a closing attempt to find it. If we fail, so be it."

So they kept on, and the day drew toward a close. But Steuben was right, and just when night was falling thickly, they found a small motte of cottonwoods, whose densely matted branches had prevented the snow from reaching the ground, leaving a fine camping-spot for the toil-worn brigade. A search of the timber revealed no enemies, and a rousing camp-fire was built, and all gathered around it to partake of their evening meal.

"I don't judge we'll be molested here," Steuben said, "unless some belated voyageur like ourselves accidentally stumbles along in this direction. The outlaws will keep close to their den this weather."

"Yer wrong thar, I swow ter gracious ef ye ain't!" put in Josh, "fer a gang o' ther salamanders invaded my camp, early this mornin', w'ich war ther means o' makin' me skeddadle. I lit out, an' they after me, until ther snow came, w'en they couldn't see me no longer."

"Then, sumthin's ther row. Mebbe Gold Rifle found and escaped wi' yer daughter, general, w'ich called out ther roughts?"

"God forbid that they are out in such a storm as this," replied the general, with a shiver.

The evening was spent in warming and eating, around the great fire; then all turned in to sleep, except Steuben and another scout, who stood guard at the western and northern sides of the motte. About midnight the snow ceased to fall as suddenly as it had come, and in half an hour the sky was clear and a few stars hung pendent in the heavens.

All around the motte lay a wide long wilderness of purest white piled upon white, while over it and all nature a strange quiet prevailed—not a sound to break the monotony of the weird dead winter scene, or the midnight hour.

But the quiet of the night did not make Old Steuben less on the alert than usual. He knew that they were just as liable to be surprised as if there were no snow upon the ground. Now and then he would pass through the camp, to ascertain if all were sleeping right: then back to his post he would go, faithfully.

It was getting along toward morning ere he discovered any signs which he calculated were of the enemy.

But at last his sharp eye caught a glimmer of light out upon the western prairie, such as might have emanated from the torch of some night-traveler. It was visible for some time, and then totally disappeared.

"Well, scout, what does it mean?" It was General Maynard who spoke, he having come out from the camp so silently that Steuben had failed to hear him.

"Do you think that enemies are approaching?"

"Guess it lugs thet way, general. 'Spect some o' the outlaws, or else red-skins aire makin' fer this yere clump. In w'ich case thar's bound ter be a rumpus. Hev ther boys had enough sleep?"

"Probably; shall I awaken them?"

"Yas, an' tell 'em ter git their pop-guns ready, fer thar'll be work inside o' half an hour. What is it, Dave?"—this to the other sentinel, who had returned from the northern and eastern side of the motte. "Any signs o' danger?"

"Reckon so; thar's a band o' fellers wi' torches approachin' ther motte from ther east, and I reckon as how it's ther outlaws."

"Then we're bound ter git it on both sides, eh? Wal, ef we divide up right, we can make et musical fer 'em, ther not knowin' our exact number. Day-break is close at hand, w'ich is fortunate in itself."

It was nearer than he was aware, and it was soon light enough so that a good view could be had of the prairie for several miles in any direction. The awakened scouts were also able to make another discovery.

Not a mile away, on the crest of a prairie-billow, was a large, barn-like structure, inclosed within a high plank fence—the Black Ranch, of which they were in search, although it was now white with the fallen snow.

"That's the Black Ranch, general," said Old Steuben, "whar ye say yer daughter is, an' et's a tough old place to attack, I tell ye."

Little Master Jack, who had been fetched along with the brigade, under the charge of an old trapper, was brought forward, and instantly recognized the building, and gave a shout of delight.

"Black Ranch!" he articulated. "Jack want to see his mamma: she over in big house."

"And, God granting, you soon shall see her, my pet," the general said, tenderly.

The men were all aroused and put in readiness for a coming combat. One party of the enemy were approaching from the east, and one from the west, each numbering about a score of men, who were undoubtedly outlaws of the notorious Tiger Track's band.

The eastern enemy were the nearest, and it was not until they were less than a mile away that it was discovered that they were armed with rifles of a long range make. This was discovered by aid of a field glass.

"Thet puts a new aspect ter ther case!" Old Steuben said, "and ef we ever calkyate ter git out o' this wi' our skulps on, we've got ter do sum o' ther tallest fightin' on record. White Injuns, an' lots o' 'em at ther same time, aire a dose I ain't fond o'."

Half of the men were distributed along the eastern side of the motte, and half along the western; then with fast-beating hearts they waited for the enemy to come within rifle range.

Death or victory was impending.

CHAPTER XV.

OUT OF DANGER—FIRE!

It was a terrible fact that the words of Gold Rifle expressed.

"My God! we are in the path of an avalanche!" Above, the storm-bound mountains rose sheer and declivitous; around them the whirling snow was a feathery vortex; above all came that ominous, frightful roar.

"A what?" Mrs. Wagner demanded, growing deathly pale; "a—"

"An avalanche!" Gold Rifle repeated, scarcely above a whisper. "We are doomed, unless we can get out of the way in four minutes or less!"

He stood not an instant idle, but worked even while he spoke. He had kicked away the lately-fallen snow until he came down to the hard-frozen crust beneath. Then with his stout hunting knife he cut out a large block of this crust. Below the snow was soft and unpacked—easy to penetrate.

"Quick! quick!" he gasped—"help scoop out a hole with your hands—there is not a second to be lost!"

Neither there was. The fearful hissing rumbling roar was growing louder; coming nearer each moment, with a terrible slide of snow and ice upon its wings.

A few seconds when a man is working for dear life, will accomplish miracles.

Both Gold Rifle and his mother set desperately, almost wildly to work in digging a trench below the crust—they worked like mad, hurling the snow out and deepening their excavation. The avalanche glided on with accelerating velocity; was not ten yards away, when they lay flat in the trench, and Gold Rifle pulled the dislodged crust into its former position above them.

Then the very mountains seemed to quake and tremble, as the giant mass of snow and ice passed over them, and plunged in a huge bank among the foothills, with a roar like an ocean hurricane. Gold Rifle's ingenuity had saved them.

For when the terrible avalanche had passed, he raised the cake, and they emerged from the mountain side, unharmed.

"God be praised, for he has watched over us, kindly!" Mrs. Wagner said devoutly. "My son, do you think there is danger of another of those dreadful snow-slides?"

"No, mother, dear. Do you not see, the mountain has been swept of all the loose snow, and it will require time for more to accumulate sufficient to cause another avalanche. We will keep on up a way further, and I have hopes that we will find the cave I have mentioned."

And with an inward prayer of thanksgiving for their escape, they continued the ascent of the steep mountain side. Gold Rifle had to lead, and with a heavy stick make indentations in the crust in which to step, or they could not have advanced a rod without slipping back a yard or more.

In the course of half an hour they arrived in front of an overhanging cliff of rock, in which was a large round hole—the entrance to the cave Gold Rifle had spoken of.

At first he hesitated to enter, fearing he might be imperiling his mother by taking her into a bear's den.

But reconnaissance dispelled this idea, and they entered, to find it a snug little cavern of twenty by sixteen feet, dry, and not ill smelling. It had evidently been inhabited before, as there were evidences of tenacity—a broken kettle, a lantern, and firewood piled up in one corner.

"Ha! this is just the place we are looking for," Gold Rifle exclaimed, gladly. "Here we can remain until I find my father, or until the storm stops, and then I'll take you to the fort. It's a good round forty miles, but we can do it easily in a couple of days afoot, by cutting across by a route I have in view."

"Do you think the outlaws are still following us, my dear boy?"

"No. They undoubtedly gave up the chase when they found that the snow was in one sense befriending us. They probably came out unprovided with provisions, and were unprepared for a siege."

Thanks to the capture he had made in the Black Ranch larder, Gold Rifle knew that they would not want for food for several days to come.

He built a rousing fire out of the dry ditch wood and cones, and soon had a genial warmth pervading the cave.

Out of the venison they made a comfortable meal, and then leaving his mother to warm at the fire, Gold Rifle left the cave to take a view of their surroundings from a more elevated point. But night was drawing near, and it was still snowing, so that he had to return without making any discovery whatever.

He found his mother standing at one side of the cave, with a fired torch in her hand, and she was visibly excited.

"Oh, Kit, do come here!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "Here's your father's name written upon the wall."

"Then he must have been here before us," replied Gold Rifle approaching and glancing at the inscription painted upon the rock: "Wild Walt, October 10th, 187—." "He has not been here since October, probably. I have not seen him for two years."

"Oh! that he were here now, for Walt was ever good to me," said Mrs. Wagner, with a sigh. "He was a man of questionable repute when I fled with him, and turned out to be an outlaw chief. But I loved him none the less for this, and soon persuaded him to leave the band and lead an honest, upright life, which he did, until I was abducted by Alf. King, one of his own men."

Gold Rifle did not consider it necessary to keep a guard, as he believed that very few knew of the mountain cave, and less were likely to attempt to

reach it in the driving storm that was now sweeping over the North-west. So he lay down and accepted of nature's gift of refreshing sleep. He awakened about midnight, and stepped without the cave to note the effect of the storm. To his surprise he found that the sky was clear with a few stars shining and that the snow had ceased to fall.

"To-morrow we shall leave this cave, and attempt to cross the wilderness again to the fort," he said to Mrs. Wagner, on his return, "so sleep and rest well, so that you will be prepared."

Had he added his own thoughts in words, something like this would have been said:

"For, dear mother, I am anxious to get back to the fort and obtain a glimpse of another face there, which has haunted me since over a week ago. 'Tis the sweet pretty face of May Maynard that is ever before me, though why should I think of and aspire to her, who is so far above me in education, wealth, and position?"

We return to the brigade whom we left in the prairie wilderness, laying low for the coming of the enemy.

General Maynard and Josh Hemperhill had charge of the half-score of men who lay within the motte on the eastern side, while Old Steuben with May Maynard—Captain May, as she was called—commanded the western approach, with nine men. The tenth, an old trapper, had been left in the center of the motte in charge of little Master Jack.

The eastern gang of outlaws were approaching the fastest, and would soon be within range, while those advancing from the west came on more leisurely.

"When these rascals get near enough, boys, let 'em have it!" cried General Maynard, now in spirit for battle. "You can guess the length of rifle range. Don't shoot their horses, but shoot dead at them. They're the curse of these prairies, and must be exterminated."

"Yas, boys, plug et ter 'em ther best ye've got writ down in yer catalogue. Put all yer solid basis character inter yer pop-guns, an' sling it straight at ther cusses an' ye're sure to win."

Nearer and nearer the outlaws rode, evidently unsuspectingly, and then, when they were within easy rifle range, General Maynard gave the word, and the crack of half a score of rifles echoed over the wilderness in white. Then as many men of the approaching band reeled in their saddles, and four dropped lifeless upon the snow. The others, however retained their seats—there was a fierce vindictive yell, and the ruffians came charging on, like mad.

"Lay low, boys—now, one, two, three and fire!" ordered the general, grimly, and again the death dealing repeaters of the brigade spoke, and six outlaws dropped back out of the saddles, never to follow the war-path again.

"Hurrah! that's ther kind fer ye, boyees—character-plated, war every one o' them bullets, an' luk at ther execution!" cried Josh.

"Yes—there's only ten left on this side, boys, but they're comin' like thunder, and you'll have to work quick!" cried the general. And he spoke the truth. The outlaws were spurring their animals and goading them on, although it was but feebly they floundered through the deep snow.

All were masked and armed with rifles and army revolvers, and they were a desperate looking set of men.

"I tell ye what!" exclaimed an old trapper, "I've disklivered one p'int ahead o' ye, boys. Thet chap thar in ther lead's none other than the cussed galoot they call Tiger Track, an' I know it."

"How d'ye know et, Greckel?"

"Be'ase I war once tuk a prisoner by him, but escaped."

"Lay low, boys!" cautioned General Maynard. "Hark! the devils have attacked 't'other side. Hurry up—let's clean out these roughs, an' join ther rest o' ther boys. One—two—three—"

And again a report of ten rifles rung out, and every saddle was emptied although some of the outlaws were not killed, but severely wounded, and left lying upon the prairie by the horses which were skurrying away in nearly every direction.

Without waiting to look after the wounded, General Maynard and his men hurried to the western side of the motte, where they found a hot contest waging. A number of bullets had been exchanged, but no one killed.

The outlaws on this side were a round score, in number, and fiercely urged on by no less than the two ruffian traders, Jacob Toleman and Boover Legree, who in some inexplicable way had joined in with the outlaws.

Old Steuben had been badly wounded in both arms, and could no longer participate in the affray, but he cheered on the men, and kept them wide awake to the enemy's weak points.

"You see them two men, Josh!" he said, pointing out the ruffian traders to the Yankee. "Waal, them chaps aire after Miss May, an' ef ye don't put a buzzer in ther ears, I'll no longer count ye a pard."

And, in the next charge that was made, both Legree and Toleman fell, mortally wounded. Several of the brigade were hard hit, but they poured such a destructive volley into the ruffians that they "turned tail," to use a western phrase, and beat an ignominious retreat.

"Licked 'em, by thunder, an' character's what did ther job—duplex, solid basis character, sure's I'm a relic o' ther characteristic family o' Hemperhill!" Josh exclaimed, dancing delightedly about. "Miss May, ye're a good'un an' no mistake! Ye're solid, an' ef ye war only ter link yer fate wi' a man o' undoubted character, like me, w'at 'appiness would be ours, yours an' mine!"

"I'm sorry, Josh!" May replied, with an effort to

keep from laughing; "it is decreed that I shall esteem you as a friend, not as a husband."

"All right, honey, I ain't going to blubber nor spout jest because ye hev given me ther mitten. Thar's lots o' fishes in ther sea, w'at'll bite at characteristic bait."

"Of course, Josh, and make you a better wife than I would."

The outlaws continued to retreat until they were out of sight from the watchers at the motte. They did not go toward the Black Ranch, and this looked rather strange, too, seeing that it was their nearest place of refuge.

"I tell ye what!" averred Old Steuben, "I've jest got an idear o' what ther row is wi' them chaps. There's but a dozen o' 'em left, an' they calyculate they ain't strong enough ter hold ther Ranch, w'ich is undoubtedly empty. So they're goin' ter light out an' quit this country."

"Perhaps you're right," assented General Maynard, "and after we have gathered in our prisoners, we'll attempt to investigate the matter. All hands, now, assist in bringing in the wounded."

It was a work that occupied considerable time, and eighteen, in all, were brought in, of the outlaws, and their hands and feet bound, and their wounds skillfully dressed. Among them were Legree and Tiger Track—Jacob Toleman having expired shortly after he had been shot. On removing the mask of Tiger Track, it was a great surprise to the men of the Settlement to behold the sinister evil face of the dead trader's son—the bullying Jay Toleman, whom we introduced at the beginning of our narrative.

The excitement of this discovery had not yet wholly abated, when Old Steuben, who had been on a scout came rushing into camp, with long leaps.

"The Ranch! the Ranch!" he cried—"it is all afire!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BORDER JUSTICE—CONCLUSION.

It was indeed true—the Black Ranch was wrapt in flames. The smoke and flames were darting from many a window and crack, and the heavy body of snow upon the roof had all melted off. There was scarcely a visible spot of the building above the high plank fence but was on fire, and the fire was evidently a well executed scheme of an incendiary.

"God forbid that my daughter Mabel is in yonder building, now?" General Maynard said, anxiously, "for no earthly power can save that outlaws' stronghold. See; yonder is a horseman just leaving the gates, and flying southward. He is evidently the fire fiend, in this case."

"Sum galoot, like enough, who hed sum grudge ag'in the outlaws!" suggested Old Steuben. "I reckon thet Gold Rifle succeeded in rescuin' yer darter, ginerall, an' thet's w'at started the outlaws abroad."

"I truly hope that such may be the case, scout, for to have my long-lost daughter restored to my arms, would be one of the greatest joys I can imagine in my old age. Of her I have ever carried a hope—that we would meet again."

"D'ye think, general, thet ef ye war ter hev yer daughter restored to you, thet ye could freely forgive her past desertion o' you, an' also forgive the at-one-time outlawed husband with whom she fled, providing he had reformed from the past, inter a man o' men?"

"Yes, scout, most freely would I forgive them both and take them to my heart, in my declining age, for except my dear May, here, I have no one to love or care for me. But, why do you speak thus, scout—what know you of my daughter and her husband?"

"I simply know that Wild Walt will be rejoiced, sir, and embrace an early opportunity to take a place at your family board as your future stay and support. But, enough of this; see, the building is now going rapidly, and soon the Black Ranch will no longer be a thing of existence. What do you propose to do with the outlaws, general?"

"I propose to give them an immediate trial, and string 'em up, if the verdict so decides," was the stern reply. "I think there will be sufficient evidence against them, and I'm satisfied that they wouldn't have granted us even the mercy of a trial."

All hands stood upon the edge of the motte and watched the burning of the Black Ranch—this place of death and the devil, which had become a rival in the North-west to what the slaughter station of the inhuman Benders was, a few years ago upon the middle border—watched the flames lick up the wood fiercely, until the great pile, fence and all, was reduced to a bed of ashes and glowing coals.

Then, the party went back to the camp, in the heart of the motte, and preparations were made for the trial of the outlaws.

General Maynard assumed the position of judge, at the request of the little band, and opened the court with a stirring speech, relating how the country had lately been scourged by bold, lawless men, who had raided, thieved and destroyed homes without number; and he wound up with a request that the gentlemen present who knew anything concerning the outlaws would step forward and be sworn, and give their testimony.

An old "vet," by the name of Darrel, came forward, was sworn, and declared that Tiger Track and his band had raided his home, but a year ago, murdered his wife and mother, and robbed him of stock and money.

Another man, from Cheyenne, testified that he had seen Tiger Track stab a man to death, in an upper settlement, and then escape.

Still another testified that he had been one of a train crossing the plains, on the previous summer, which had been attacked by Tiger Track's band, and all hands save himself and teamster were murdered.

"This is enough, Gentlemen of the Jury, to satisfy the minds of any honest men. But, if there's any more testimony, let's have it."

"There is!" exclaimed a voice, and who should ride forward into the space where the border court was held but Gold Rifle. "I can testify, and swear to it, if necessary, that I was recently captured by old Jacob Toleman, and Tiger Track's outlaws, and taken into the Black Ranch, where I was pitched into a pit, where there were many dead bodies, some of them recently placed there, others decayed and nothing but skeletons left. That they were victims of the outlaws, there can be no doubt, and as a detective, I vote that the inhuman scoundrels all be strung up!"

"And so they shall be. Gentlemen of the Jury, you have heard the testimony of witnesses. You may retire to consider the case."

"No need o' that, g'neral!" said Old Steuben, who formed one of the decisive body known as the "Jury." "We don't leave our seats for such cases as this, but unanimously say 'guilty,' an' so string 'em up, ter onces. That's w'at they deserve, according ter our agreement—eh, boyces?"

"Ay! ay!" responded the Jury.

"Then in the name of the law, which we have of necessity taken into our own hands, I sentence each and every one of the prisoners to be lynched in the southern end of this motte, and may God have mercy upon their souls."

The words were hardly spoken, ere the trappers and traders composing the brigade, sprung forward to do the work, which, according to their views, was justice.

In vain the poor wretches begged and entreated—all except Tiger Track, or Jay Toleman, but it was of no use. The resolution of the Regulators was not to be broken.

Jay Toleman was the only calm one among the lot, as they were borne away toward the assigned lynching ground. He held a sort of grim, bull-dog defiance—did not quail, but rather denounced the captors in the vilest language of his vile vocabulary.

The young wretch's heart was too hardened—his soul too deeply steeped in crime for him to care for death.

At last all of the outlaws had been removed to the southern end of the motte, and all of the brigade except four had gone to witness the "sport." For in the remote West, a good old-fashioned lynching is considered by the frontiersman next to the Fourth of July.

The four remaining behind were General Maynard, Gold Rifle, Old Steuben, and May. The quartette stood facing each other for some moments—expectancy upon the faces of the general and the scout.

Gold Rifle stood with arms folded, a half-humorous expression upon his countenance, and a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Well," he said, glancing from one to another, "I take it, by your looks, that you're expecting something of me."

"And you're exactly right," replied Old Steuben, with a laugh. "We're expecting much of you. But first, let us know each other. Kit, my boy, this is your grandfather, General Maynard, and this young lady, your aunt, I suppose. General, and Miss May, this is your relative, Kit Deronda, detective."

"We are glad to meet you, young man," the general said, extending his hand, "and although it is a little surprise at this time, I must confess that I've had an inkling of our relationship, suggested by my darling adopted daughter, May. But, Steuben, you say 'my son'; can it be possible that you are the Wild Walt Wagner with whom my daughter fled, years ago?"

"The same, general," and the old scout-guide threw off a wig and false beard, and a handsome-looking man of thirty-eight stood revealed.

"Then, praise God, for I am reunited to my dear father, husband and children!" cried a voice, and Mrs. Wagner, so long lost to loving hearts, rushed into the scene, and fell into the open embrace of Wild Walt.

Such a glad reunion! The two men, husband and father, went into ecstasies over the returned one, and while they were engaged thus, Gold Rifle or Kit Deronda, turned to Miss May, who was standing a little aloof, holding Master Jack by the hand.

"Well, Miss Maynard, this seems to be a glad some moment, does it not? and it occurs to me, just now, that we must be brother and sister, eh, or aunts and uncles, or—"

"Only by adoption, sir!" May replied, a painful flush rising to her cheek. "I have lately found that I am not General Maynard's own daughter, but an adopted one—the child of an old army officer, named Faulkland. Therefore I am an outsider, but I cannot help feeling overjoyed all the same at the happy turn of events."

"Which shows the goodness of your heart. And I'm right glad, too, that you are no relation to me, although I would love to have a sister. I suppose this is my little brother whom I have never seen."

After the exchange of a few more words May and Gold Rifle joined the others, where Wild Walt was speaking.

"I joined an outlaw band, general, after I fled, accompanied by your daughter. In the community in which you lived at that time, I was nearly unknown, and the name of detective had been little heard. I was a detective on my own hook, and joined the outlaws purposely to ascertain their force, and how to successfully break them up. I was made their chief, and known as Wild Walt Wagner. I had not been forty-eight hours with them when I was seen and recognized by a party of hunters, and branded as an outlaw. It was useless now to leave them, as death awaited me outside of their ranks. So I staid until the goodness of my wife, here, caused me to flee

from them, with our little boy. I hid myself, but Alf King one of the men, stole away my wife, and she was appropriated, later, by Dolph Carew, known to you as Toleman, Jr. With him she came to this country, and she has just told me that the wretch forced her to marry him. The little boy, here, is a result of their union. But he shall never lack for a father, in me, and now that we are all reunited in one happy family, I see no reason why we should ever part."

After about an hour the trappers and traders came marching back from the southern end of the motte, singing in wild harmony a peculiar lynching song:

"We've hung up the cusses to a cottonwood tree,
To a cottonwood tree, to a cottonwood tree,
They plead an' they arried,
But we couldn't all agree,
So we boosted 'em up to glor-ry-ry."

"Yas, cap't'n, we've suspended them galoots above wulf reach, an' they're out o' sin an' temptation."

"An' I swow ter breeches, thar warn't only one solid basis character galoot among 'em!" put in Josh. "He war thet Jay Toleman, or Tiger Track—tuk his rations as nateral as ary hoss ked do, wi'out a grunt."

"If you've hung the wretches you've done the country a good service," said Wild Walt, "for them outlaws had no equal for fiendish cruelty and devilishness. May God, however, forgive them, as we all hope to be forgiven our sins."

To which there was a hearty amen.

That night when all were gathered around a rousing camp-fire, Gold Rifle was importuned to relate all about his adventures in rescuing Mrs. Deronda, his mother, which he did, touching lightly, however, on parts where he had played the heroic. He related what he had discovered about the Black Ranch, concerning the counterfeit scheme, and his experience in the death pit.

"Who do you think fired the Ranch, Kit?" Wild Walt asked.

"The guard who aided me to escape, no doubt, for he was a bitter enemy of Tiger Track. His name he said was Renfrau."

"Do you think it will pay to overhaul the ruins of the Ranch to get at that counterfeit money?"

"No. It has doubtless been melted, and could be of no use to us, anyhow."

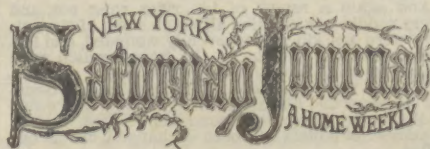
And so the Black Ranch's ashes were left undisturbed, and on the following morning the brigade set out for the settlement, which, in due time, they safely reached, the Maynard party proceeding on to the general's quarters, glad to get out of the trackless wilderness.

May Faulkland had her birthday party after all, and a brilliant affair it was, to which all the soldiers and trappers were invited. Gold Rifle was present, and on that auspicious occasion found time to whisper his love-dream to the fair May. And it became known, later, that they were engaged; later still, in the spring-time, they were united in matrimony—and they all live almost under the guns of the fort, the two families of Derondas, as happy as the day is long.

General Maynard is still grand supervisor of things at the fort, even in his old age, and finds at the homes of his own daughter and daughter of adoption, a double blessing to his declining years.

The gold which years ago Wild Walt had taken from the outlaws, has been contributed, we learn, to a committee at Yankton for the purpose of erecting a free school on a grand scale. Walt "would not have the stuff on his hands," he said. And with Gold Rifle lives as a retainer no less a personage than eccentric Josh Hemperhill.

THE END.



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